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The Void Profound: Sovereignty and Denial
in *Paradise Lost* and *Doctor Faustus*

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“long is the way,
And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light”
Paradise Lost, ll. 432-3

“If a nation decides to live by lies, it has chosen a
course of intellectual stagnation, and ultimately of
political decay.”
Peter Dale Scott,
The Assassinations, 1975 (ix)

Marlowe’s integrity is nothing in politics and
everything in religion; in neither sphere will he
tolerate wishful thinking. Milton’s integrity is
everything in politics, and nothing in religion; in
neither sphere will he give up his wishful thinking.

Collective Guilt and Original Sin

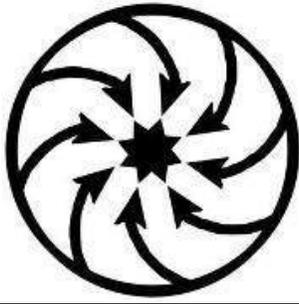
Paradise Lost is a troubled but sublime attempt to
put God on trial, the very God in whom a majority of
Americans still claim to believe. Similarly, the
literature on government erosion of popular
sovereignty is a vexed but noble attempt to think
past the limits of official opinion and earnestly
diagnose the legitimacy of our political institutions.
In each case, revulsion at the sight of the abyss
causes the investigation to lapse, and a series of
substitutions is interposed between the seeker and
the intolerable truth. Religion becomes the process
of protecting oneself from religious insight;¹
systemic politics becomes the process of preventing
insurgent democracy. According to the “deep
politics” paradigm developed by Peter Dale Scott,
this is the principle by which law enforcement and
organized crime maintain one another in symbiosis:
informant criminals betray their rivals and their own

¹ . See for instance Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack On
Christendom*; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic
and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

subordinates into the hands of the police, in
exchange for protection. The compromised law
enforcement officials benefit from access to
contraband goods and services furnished by the
informant criminals who continue to operate.² Deep
politics is in part a system of scapegoating in which
one tiny subset of a larger group of criminals is
sacrificed, in exchange for the remaining criminals’
freedom to operate without fear of law enforcement.
Note that this does not describe “conspiracy”—a
special episode that interrupts a normative pattern
of legitimacy and stability—it describes the system
of ongoing symbiotic relationships between actors
who are illegitimate by definition and actors whose
illegitimacy is cloaked in officialdom.

Satan is the scapegoat in *Paradise Lost*, sent into
an eternal exile bearing the split-off sinfulness of the
Heavenly remnant, and we still use the phrase “the
great Satan” to refer to whatever serves that
function (Communism, “the” Jews, U.S. imperialism,
etc). Long after the fall from Heaven that opens
Paradise Lost, God allows Satan to take up his
voluntary, permanent job as corruptor of human
affairs, the Devil. It is he who invents guns and
artillery, the weapons of warfare used not by God’s
loyal Angels, but by the rebels and later by us
human moderns (*PL* 500-506). Why God permits
this, or rather just how God can permit it without

² . This local version involves police compromised
by organized crime; the national version
constitutes the public state compromised by the
“Deep State,” another term coined by Scott,
where intelligence agencies use violence
(assassination and false-flag terrorism) as a tool
to achieve lucrative political ends that are often
still more violent (war and narcotraffic) on behalf
of their *de facto* clients. See Scott, *Deep Politics
and the Death of JFK* (University of California
Press, 1992) and *The American Deep State:
Wall Street, Big Oil, and the Attack on U.S.
Democracy* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,
2014). See also David Talbot, *The Devil’s
Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise
of America’s Secret Government* (Harper, 2015).



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impairing his goodness, is never made entirely clear (*PL* I. 210-220 is one attempt). Milton's theodicy and God's status (whether more narrowly construed, as His legitimacy, or more broadly construed, as His existence) somehow depend upon Satan's responsibility for the potentially meaningless suffering that we call evil. Like the State in Peter Dale Scott's Weberian dystopia, the God in Milton's poem successfully seeks a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; maintains this monopoly through a contemptuous symbiosis with the successful claimants to the illegitimate use of force (Satan; deep political processes); and contrives the legitimacy of this monopoly by projecting evil onto the symbiotic partner, disguising but reinforcing the symbiosis.

This may suggest that the roots of the deep political system lie buried in the monotheist psyche, not least in the Puritan version.³ Milton's unthinkable anxiety is that the villain of the Christian story is not Satan, nor the Pope, the Jews, Pilate, nor ancient Rome: God is the villain. And if our loving God does not love, he may not be God at all: we ourselves may be the only available culprits for the woe of history, without a revealed religion to help us put it right. To experience this loss of theodicy's God seems to me part of growing up and reconciling oneself to what Freud called the reality principle. While such a loss affords an opportunity for reassessment of a broad range of important issues, many people fend off this experience with elaborate structures of denial, of which *Paradise Lost* is among the most sublime. From my perspective, our failure to confront our own magical thinking has profound collective implications for the rest of society. This is part of why I find the trial of familiar Christian notions in Milton so intellectually urgent.

The corresponding nightmare of deep politics is that the political killings of 1963 and 1968 were part of an ongoing, murderously wrongheaded trend in our national life, and that not even a Nuremberg tribunal would restore American politics to Constitutional principles. Bringing individuals to justice without restructuring the system will only stabilize the

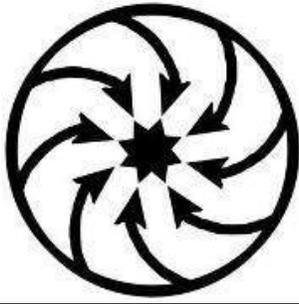
³ . See Richard Rubinstein, *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*.

abuses by soothing the public, diminishing the popular interest in more radical reforms. I find a collective guilt in the American failure to restrict the intelligence services from: collaborating with organized crime, engaging in drug commerce, destabilizing sovereign governments foreign and domestic, assassination of the leadership of citizens' movements all over the globe, and generally fulfilling the fears of Thomas Hobbes:

...also all men that are ambitious of military command, are inclined to continue the causes of war and to stir up trouble and sedition: for there is no honor military but by war; nor any such hope to mend an ill game as by causing a new shuffle. (*Leviathan* XI.)

Intelligence operatives still behave this way, sabotaging democracy's efforts to survive, while the popular energies that alone might overcome the resulting militarism are dissipated in worship of the Invisible. Our collective failure to outgrow institutionalized monotheism and our collective failure to protect the constitution are somehow deeply connected. Perhaps salient aspects of Christianity (e.g., the strong Father as final cause, presiding over the Son's crucifixion, together with the "depravity of man" that brought about its efficient cause) facilitate the authoritarian tendencies of the political right and its supporters. Perhaps the Pauline mythologizing of "Christ's death" effaces the life of Jesus of Nazareth in a way that helps Americans to tolerate the mythmaking of their own contemporary authorities.

This is the kernel of truth in the otherwise reactionary sentiment that somehow, *everybody did it*. Rather like the Rolling Stones in their Miltonic "Sympathy for the Devil" ("I shouted out, 'Who killed the Kennedys?' / When after all, it was you and me"), I.F. Stone wrote in 1963, "All of us had a finger on that trigger in Dallas." Though the journalist seems to have meant that Kennedy's mass appeal elevated him into a vulnerable celebrity, what little sense this now makes is that our failure to prevent the crime is continuous with our failure to understand it afterward. It's this failure to confront deep politics, and not any failure to resist Kennedy's charisma, that universalizes the guilt in



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the events of November 22 and gives them their permanent relevance to world affairs—and to any study of ideology and denial.

Plato's *Euthyphro* shows Socrates asking a few very dangerous questions about the piety we owe to the Divine. "Then, if piety is ministering to the gods, does it benefit the gods and make them better? And would you grant that whenever you do something pious, you're making some god better?" (13c). Christianity gave a new answer to this question: that you owe worship to Jesus Christ because he has already died in your stead, to expiate (your) Original Sin, of which you can't be guilty (Adam and Eve did it) but for which you (or as it turns out, Christ) must be responsible. In *Work on Myth*, Hans Blumenberg wrote: "Dogma's late discovery of Original Sin crystallized out, as the question that had been absorbed in it, what it actually was that redemption had to redeem people from." (183). Ethically, this is a debt of gratitude: you are to consider yourself a formerly condemned criminal whom the Christ has saved from death and devilry. For Augustine as for Luther, the consequences of Adam's fall are transmitted to all his progeny as a matter of course. Our depravity is the result of Adam's.

As the audience of Paul's letters (and of most of the documents that became the New Testament), the various communities of early Christians and their Greco-Roman pagan neighbors are told that they all need the grace offered by Christ, lest they remain polluted by Original Sin. These beneficiaries of Greco-Roman civilization (and its tendency toward syncretism) would be heartily motivated to expunge any magical guilt said to have accrued to them. In Greek literature, Oedipus gets told by divine sources that he himself *and the entire city of Thebes* are both polluted with the *miasma* of guilt and must seek purification. In Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass*, Lucius must follow divinely revealed instructions in order to transform himself from a beast back into a human being. Original Sin is not so different a problem; one is told that one is polluted, and then told how to purify oneself of this particular pollution. How is this salvation to be achieved? By hearing the "good news" and somehow becoming persuaded that it is true. This

state of belief enables a renunciation of one's own conduct as the source of good outcomes, and the substitution of the belief itself:

... them who renounce
Thir own both righteous and unrighteous deeds,
And live in thee transplanted, and from thee
Receive new life. *PL III*, (289-294).

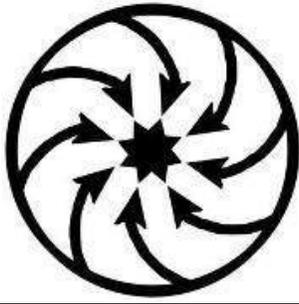
We are to be abjectly grateful to God for His Son's sacrifice on our behalf. This makes it quite unlikely that we will turn toward the Father God at the back of this story and discover whether the responsibility for evil may lie there, with the spirit of Monotheism itself, and not in the Garden with Adam or in an earlier Heaven with Lucifer.⁴ Insofar as mankind invented God, the responsibility for evil (a category that now includes the loss of integrity incurred in the worship of what William Blake called "Nobodaddy") lies once again with us and, as Friedrich Nietzsche came to insist, with Jews for having invented monotheism and with Christians and Muslims for having extended it.⁵

Theodicy and Experience

The very beginning of Satan's dissent is the moment when he interprets the advent of the Son's reign as an impairment of his own dignity. He can have had no experience of such a situation in the past, just as, after his Fall, he can appeal to no model for repentance (no one having ever repented of anything before, despite Heaven's having already been populated for some time). First he refuses to submit; then he refuses to repent his initial defiance, which prolongs it indefinitely. Compare the following passage of the German psychologist Arno Gruen: [The] aggression is a reaction to a decrease in autonomy, even in those cases where a person tries

⁴ 4. See *Doubt's Boundless Sea*, Don Cameron Allen.

⁵ . All three faiths achieved their expansions largely by the sword and in the name of peace. Just as the War Department changes its name to Defense in 1947, this practice of war for peace was preceded by a more honest era of war for plunder, as in the Homeric poems.



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to struggle against this loss. The whole history of our childhood is repeated here, parental suppression of the child's feelings and spontaneous responses succeeds in making the child obedient, but that only conceals and at the same time intensifies the aggression. (Gruen, 40)

The link between what Milton portrays as Heaven's first political event (The appointment of God's Son at V 605 and Satan's initial refusal to submit to it) and the cascade of its eternal repetitions by Satan, is God's punitive paternal fiat: eternal damnation. Although Satan's own spite quickly ruins his claim to much more of our sympathy,⁶ it seems only fair to admit that the fallen seraph might never have become so spiteful (and "heap on himself damnation" [PL I, 215]) had God responded to this episode of sibling rivalry with something more gentle. Indeed, from Lucifer's initial error are the Fall of Satan, the Fall of Man, "and all our Woe" (all the suffering in history including the English Revolution and all the political travails of John Milton) supposed to be derived. Indeed, nothing less than the entirety of Milton's conscious, expressed intention in *Paradise Lost*—to justify the ways of God to man—is at risk of utter failure if it should turn out that God was wrong in responding to Satan's disobedience the way He did. Arno Gruen's essay continues:

The child's rage is directed against its own suffering and senses of aliveness, for these are apparently what caused the parents' oppressive behavior in the first place. The first split in our being is the result: the rejection of what could have become the foundation for the development of our autonomy—namely, our sense of aliveness. And although we have been made accomplices in our own suppression, this doesn't mean that our self-hatred is diminished as a consequence; on the contrary, a continual process of splitting takes place, which is reinforced by societal norms. (41).

⁶ . See "The Technique of Degradation," in *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*, A.J.A. Waldock (1947). It's chiefly to this book that Stanley Fish seems to have been replying in his 1967 *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*.

A propos of this description of authoritarian parenting, consider Satan's predicament. The "splitting" Gruen describes sounds like the birth of Sin from Satan's head. The phrase "accomplices in our own suppression" evokes those lines of God's triumphant exploitation of his defeated opponent:

So stretcht out huge in length the Arch-fiend lay
Chain'd on the burning Lake, nor ever thence

[210]

Had ris'n or heav'd his head, but that the will
And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
Left him at large to his own dark designs,
That with reiterated crimes he might
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought

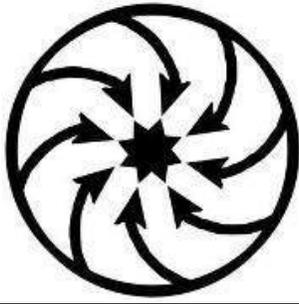
[215]

Evil to others, and enrag'd might see
How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn
On Man by him seduc't, but on himself
Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance pour'd.

So: for Satan, neglect ("Left him at large to his own dark designs") and abuse ("Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance"); for man, "infinite goodness, grace and mercy."

Perhaps it never becomes fully clear, even in Abdiel's speech, just what the grounds were upon which Satan was expected to render his submission. Whatever those grounds, among their entailments must be the proposition that God was not asking the angels to do something that would endanger their own moral existence when He asked them to bow down and worship His new "only begotten Son." For His own part, God does not so much assure the angels that they are safe from moral suicide (much less actually demonstrate this to them) as preside over an order in which doubts about this matter supposedly cannot arise. And yet they do arise.

It seems to me the mission of *Paradise Lost* is to demonstrate (a) that Satan and his rebels are mistaken in these doubts, and (b) that they are fully and solely responsible for their own mistake, regardless of (1) God's foreknowledge that they would indeed fall, would indeed make Satan's mistake about abundance and scarcity; given (2)



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the initial conditions, which lie with God's creation of them "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall"; and despite (3) God's announcement at V. 600-615, which, quite apart from its flaws and merits as a piece of statecraft, or parenting, or Godhood, would seem to be the first major *event* in Heavenly history, and the immediate occasion of the doubts to which Satan succumbs.

I take Milton to have been motivated to make this demonstration by his own psychic needs, religious, political, and aesthetic, needs whose prodigious energies he devoted to persuading his fellows that the Christian God is just. On behalf of his interpretive community,⁷ Milton undertook to prove that the stories his culture told about God's justice are both true and coherent. Due to Milton's learning and to his genius, reading the poem brings some stellar rewards; Milton is preacher, orator, statesman, a man near the heart of the English Revolution, and a profound thinker in theology. More than this, his gift for blank verse is, at its best, comparable to that of Christopher Marlowe, who invented the form and mastered it. But all this bounty comes with a price; at the peril of our moral lives, the poem puts us questions about the way we respond to its demonstration.⁸

Signs of dangerous anxiety and stress are strewn across the narrative landscape of Milton's grand design like the craters Galileo saw maculating the Moon. Some are like meteors, inflicted from without: the disaster of the Stuart Restoration, (or, in Dante's case, the exile from Florence). But others well up

⁷ . In its largest extension, Milton's audience is (like Dante's) all mankind, followed in more particularity by, say, readers of English, readers of epic poetry, Englishmen, Christians, Protestants, and at the smallest extreme "fit audience... though few."

⁸ . Harold Skulsky, *Milton and the Death of God*: "Aren't many of us disinterested to the fatal point of being uninterested in whether this or any other attorney manages to get an acquittal for God? Not when we're in the dock as well as the jurybox." (54)

from deep below the surface, threatening to erupt with the molten magma of the repressed: doubts about Theodicy, personal agency, free will, and theism itself. Like Dante's *Commedia*, Milton's poem includes a deep *katabasis* into the basement of the Western mind, where dark issues work their perverse logic; where intolerable facts and unimaginable possibilities are isolated from the lifeworld of daily experience. Milton allowed these deep aporetic (having-no-way-forward) anomalies to surface in various ways in his poem, just as Dante had, and for the same reason: poetic creativity has been recognized, at least since Plato's *Ion*,⁹ as a state of privileged access to that numinous realm which Freud came to call the unconscious.¹⁰

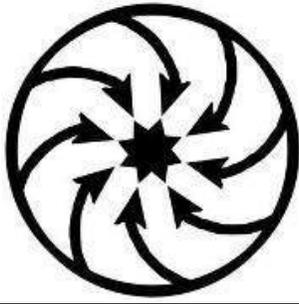
Ideology and Repression

But this same unconscious is the domain of the repressed, so that creative inspiration and forbidden knowledge enter the poem from the same source, through the same aperture in the repression system.¹¹ The forbidden knowledge is, in the case of

⁹ . See *Ion*. Before Plato, the Homeric poems attribute poetic inspiration to the Muse, who is later understood as an aspect of the Christian God (*PL*, VII. 1-40), and later still, as internal to the poet's psyche.

¹⁰ . As Christian Meier shows in his excellent book *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, for the city of Athens, the drama festival addressed problems whose paradoxical character made them intractable to the more rational Assembly. Similarly, for the individual Freudian subject, dreams address problems whose paradoxical character makes them intractable to the more rational waking mind. One might argue that this same rationality-transcending tragic function was served by the Marlowean and Shakespearean theater that inherited it from Greek tragedy, but that by Milton's time this function had shifted out of the drama and into the epic.

¹¹ . There is a well-attested link between imaginative access to unconscious sources of creativity, and cognitive access to dangerously



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Paradise Lost, all that the defense of Milton's God would benefit by concealing. It includes a sprawling tableau of emergent, radical ideas, many of which had ancient precursors (heliocentrism, Mortalism), while others did not (telescopic astronomy, Baconian experimentalism¹²); older sources that confront similar issues include *King Lear* and Aeschylus' grand meditation on justice, power, and divinity, *Prometheus Bound*.

Christopher Marlowe's *Tragicall History of Doctor Faustus* compasses many of the same issues as *Paradise Lost*, but it responds to them in the opposite direction. Marlowe was a spy, who knew the dangerous inner workings of Elizabethan sovereignty and aristocratic nobility, and participated in them with a profound cynicism. In religion, Marlowe was a strikingly daring and persuasive atheist, and therefore a hunted man. By contrast, Milton was an idealist in politics who worked for the establishment of a Republic via regicide; while in religion, he was determined to prove Christianity's truth and God's goodness. Where the disillusioned Marlowe laces his *Faustus* with a red thread of defiant atheism, Milton submits to the most grotesque self-torture in his effort to "justify the ways of God to man." *Marlowe's integrity is nothing in politics and everything in religion; in neither sphere will he tolerate wishful thinking. Milton's integrity is everything in politics, and nothing in religion; in neither sphere will he give up his wishful thinking.*

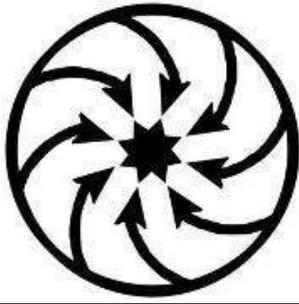
So there is a domain of the repressed, called "the system Unconscious," such that among its most important contents for *Paradise Lost* is the fear of metaphysical abandonment: that there is no God

dissident positions. Consider Plato's celebration of Socratic trance in *Symposium*; Giordano Bruno's emphasis on "Heroic frenzy," as crucial to his own revolutionary insights in cosmology; and Peter Dale Scott's dual status as the author of five volumes of poetry from New Directions Press, and the theoretician of "Deep Politics."

¹² . Bacon's *New Organon* achieved its desired distance from its ancient model, Aristotle's *Organon*.

and no Devil. While this "forbidden knowledge" reading of *Paradise Lost* may emancipate some readers from Milton's punitive theism, it also burdens us anew with the responsibility for confronting our own repressed fears, lest we "subscribe slave" to a Whitewash of our own (like the *Warren Report*, or an inauthentic selfhood). Where Dante's *Inferno* warned against sin, *Paradise Lost* warns against the way every legitimation crisis oozes denial. In this it resembles Shakespeare's turn of the century political dramas, especially *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Richard II*. But if the interpretive habits of literary criticism are to issue in the good life, (as English Departments everywhere insist that they can), then we must not fail to mention that *Paradise Lost* also resembles innumerable denial systems closer to home. These team with similar patterns of repressions and denials that we find in the old poems, because ideology is a marvelous thing: it shows us what we can be permitted to think, and divides it into the *acceptable* and the *dangerous*. But in exchange for a higher level of political and psychic risk, ideology also silently points beyond the horizon of these two categories, toward the *excluded*: various third alternatives for the organization of society and psyche.

Consider again those three categories. *The acceptable* is the dominant, primary story about the world: e.g., the Christianity that Milton clung to and Marlowe rejected; or the authoritarian, imperialist nationalism that Marlowe accepted and Milton rejected (and which Americans like J. Edgar Hoover and Clay Shaw embraced). *The dangerous* is that set of alternative, secondary stories which the primary story actively opposes but mentions at every opportunity (Satan's lost cause, Communism, etc.). The *excluded* is that vast continuum of cultural alternatives which lie beyond these two groups of ideas, and even require a long journey away from them (Marlowe's defiant Atheism; Milton's defiant republican opposition to the English monarchy and aristocracy; Jim Garrison's (or Peter Dale Scott's) defiant opposition to the Deep Political system of the United States). Much of the business of ideology is done by constructing a totalizing dichotomy between the acceptable and the dangerous, so as



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to preclude the possibility, and even the mention, of the excluded.

In *Paradise Lost*, the acceptable is the claim to success in the avowed project of justifying the ways of God to man. The dangerous is the Satanic position, with all its attractive qualities as appreciated by so many authors from Blake and Shelley to William Empson. The excluded is the repressed atheism that rumbles through the poem like a tremor.

In the United States, the acceptable is American exceptionalism, nationalism (which took the form of a militant anti-communism from the end of WWII until the fall of the USSR in 1991), and imperialism. The dangerous is an ever changing category, occupied for fifty years by Communism and now comprising the best enemies money can buy in the endless "War on Terror." Although the deep political system is excluded from *discourse*, what is excluded from *reality* is the Constitution, with its checks and balances, since real executive power lies with the unelected forces of the intelligence community, over which there is no real congressional oversight without retaliatory murder.

Power and Secrecy

"...Commission from above

I have receav'd, to answer thy desire
Of knowledge within bounds; beyond abstain
To ask, nor let thine own inventions hope
Things not reveal'd, which th' invisible King,
Onely omniscient, hath suppress in Night..."

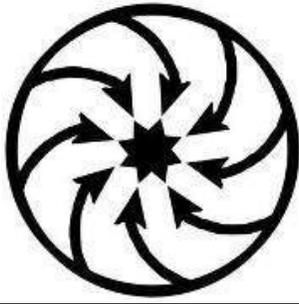
Archangel *Raphael* to Adam, in John Milton's 1674 *Paradise Lost*, Book VII. Lines 118-123

"The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial... Speculation about Oswald's motivation ought to be cut off... *We need something to head off public speculation or Congressional hearings of the wrong sort.*"

Nicholas Katzenbach, Deputy Attorney General, Memo of 25 November, 1963

At Book V, 600-615, God introduces his Son to the heavenly host and announces that He has already sworn that all of them will bend their knees to the Son and worship him. Whereas loyal angels like Abdiel experience this change as an addition to the abundant economy of love, Lucifer sees it as the advent of an economy of scarcity. In so doing, he invents the experience of feeling personally threatened, for which he earns the name *Satan* (the Adversary; the Opposer; the Threat). Unless, of course, God has already had that experience, and is projecting it in Satan's direction. On this view, Lucifer becomes Satan when God projects onto him a wounded portion of God's own psyche. Later in the poem, Satan argues for this view in a mixed and confused performance, polluting his arguments with new mistakes and escalation. Still, with or without Satan's arguments, the logic of God's own arguments and His action in the poem can be taken to suggest that scarcity supervenes in Heaven at the moment of God's announcement. Satan is responding to a real threat of scarcity. Though Satan's behavior and his reasoning rapidly degenerate beyond the point where this argument can be applied to win him much sympathy, the initial phase of Satan's rebellion upon which all the sequel in some ways rather heavily depends does seem to be an ethically defensible act of withdrawal and self defense, which gets treated as though it were aggressive rebellion, and quite savagely punished, beyond hope of reprieve. That this is unjust, Milton cannot admit. It is as though his regicidal defiance of Charles I had spent all of Milton's will to autonomy, or even moral imagination. Somehow Marlowe is given over to passionate truth-speaking in his atheism, but servile in his political compromise. Milton, by contrast, is passionately defiant of the dominant ideology in his Republicanism, while excruciatingly bound to most of the premises of Christianity despite a deep perception of their incoherence. In some ways this is simply the Calvinist predicament¹³, but Milton had climbed inside the narrative of his culture's theodicy

¹³ See Allan Sinfield, *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660*. Kent: Croom Helm Books, 1983.



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to set it right, and justify the ways of God to man. Apart from his significant deviations from it—such as his anti-Trinitarianism—its contradictions were his own.

Stanley Fish has argued that Milton is using our susceptibility to Satan's rhetoric as a way of demonstrating the depraved state of our own interpretive powers. We are fallen people whose minds can no longer claim to be impervious to rhetoric and suasion, all cases of which (for the reader, in Professor Fish's view) ultimately reduce to this case, Satan's seduction (of the rebel angels first, and of Eve second). Because Milton deploys it within Christian, culturally sovereign terms, this is a remarkably subtle and cogent way of outflanking resistance to one's claims - simply add the claim that your audience will probably be very resistant, since their minds have been warped in advance by the very figure that your claims denounce. This way, God's lack of forgiveness is not a failure of His omni-benevolence (for which it might be morally necessary for free beings to try and hold God accountable), but the inevitable shadow of Satan's ("self-tempted, self-depraved" III, 130) failure to repent.

But this failure has roots not only in Satan's-own-freewill-which-God-foreknew, but in Satan's *narcissistic wounding* and lapse into jealousy. This is the sort of formulation we get if we consider the announcement at *PL* V 600-615 in human (i.e., *psychological*) terms, since the poem has the more to teach us if we do so. First let's agree to commit the "pathetic fallacy," and imagine (as we read) that the rhetoric provided us by the poet and ascribed by him to his characters represents the collected productions of a variety of angelic minds (internal to the poem), *as well* as the unitary handiwork of a single human craftsman (external to the poem) called John Milton.

Ethics and Difference

Satan's rebellion is his response to the following announcement, by God (V, 600-615):

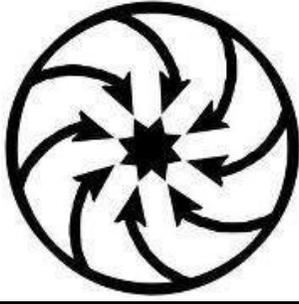
Hear all ye Angels, Progenie of Light,
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Vertues,
Powers,
Hear my Decree, which unrevok't shall stand.

This day I have begot whom I declare
My onely Son, and on this holy Hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
At my right hand; your Head I him appoint;
And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow
All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord:
Under his great Vice-gerent Reign abide
United as one individual Soule
For ever happie: him who disobeyes
Mee disobeyes, breaks union, and that day
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
Into utter darkness, deep ingulft, his place
Ordaind without redemption, without end.

God is a Father of many children of one kind (the Angels), here announcing that he has conceived another child of another kind (the Son). By the fiat of the Father, articulated in this announcement, the new child is to be granted all the worship and the awe that the children have hitherto given only to their Father. To put this into perspective, imagine that the operative *difference in kind* (never fully clarified in *Paradise Lost*) is not that between Angels and the Son of God, but a much simpler and more familiar difference in kind; say, gender. Satan among the Angels is like a senior daughter among the many daughters of a father, a father who then announces the conception of his new son that will inherit His position and preeminence, along with the whole property, house, wealth, obedience, service, et cetera.¹⁴ Primogeniture would be the "right" by which a difference in kind (gender) becomes available as a source of moral grounds for its own economic consequences in such a story.

Once unmasked as a product of transitory human institutions, primogeniture became vulnerable to a critique of its alleged justice that already lay immanent in the experience of thousands of daughters and younger-than-eldest brothers. It began to lose ground, until it could no longer serve as a source of grounds for inheritance decisions. For example, when Shakespeare writes Edmund's soliloquy in *King Lear*, "Stand up for bastards," primogeniture is under attack but still well able to

¹⁴ . This has been the fate of innumerable persons in history, and of a few in literature.



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defend itself. It is defeated in the Statute of Wills of 1540, which allows eldest sons to be disinherited under certain conditions.

If the difference in kind between the Son and the angels is all that legitimates his assumption of God's authority (line 606), it might prove just as difficult to defend. Similarly, on the earthly side, myriad persons throughout history have become the martyrs of their own beliefs, as Jesus of Nazareth did; of those myriads, a smaller but still enormous set had in common with him his central ideals of kindness and loving humility. Only *this* social activist dies a death which Paul, followed by millions of eventual adherents, claims as vicarious for all mankind, ransoming us from what Luther called "sin, death, and the devil." Why this one? Because alone of all political and social martyrs, Jesus had entered into the flesh voluntarily, and not by nature. But only he had the *opportunity* to enter into the flesh voluntarily, and he had this opportunity because he was God's son. So this ethical fact (his action of choosing the incarnation) points backward toward the difference in kind that it was supposed to transcend. The Son-ship of the Son is surely as much a difference in kind as any other accident of birth, like gender or class, or for that matter, ethnicity. If the difference between the Son and the Angels (also called "Sons," for instance in *PL XI*. 84) depends entirely upon the various forms of the Greek word *monogenē* ("only begotten"), it will be hard for Milton to use it as the foundation of God's justice, since it's a matter of birth, not conduct, that makes the conduct salvific when it comes about. From the first tyrannicides of ancient Athens and republican Rome, to Milton and his co-Revolutionists, to Thom Paine, democratic ideology has railed against kingship with the observation that kings are mere mortals like their subjects; no legitimate and legitimating difference in kind really exists.¹⁵

"DEFENDED FRUIT"

The irony of Man's first disobedience was that it

¹⁵ . Thus Cassius to Brutus: "I had as lief not be, as live / In awe of such a thing as I myself." *Julius Caesar*, I.ii. 102-103.

caused him to fall from an initial ignorance in which no issue of God's justice could or did arise, to a condition of multivalent, shifting faith and doubt in which God's justice is always being threatened by the experience of evil and of God's punishing severity:

In Oedipal terms, the "fruit" is the sexual access to the mother's body which the father forbids as sin.¹⁶ So it's quite ironic that the terms of God's punishment seem to repeat the Oedipal consummation of Man's crime: "to remove him I decree, / And send him from the Garden forth *to till / The ground whence he was taken.*"¹⁷ The disobedience is far more important than any magical effect of the fruit, understood in the tradition as a mere apple. The "defended fruit" is the apple plus the prohibition. In Satan's seduction and in God's discourse alike, the name "Tree of Knowledge" implies that its harvester will enter a condition of complete gnosis (knowledge in Plato's sense of *episteme*, a true and complete awareness) enjoying some vicarious version of God's

¹⁶ . To join Sophocles to Freud, consider line 1485 of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*: "I was shown to have become a father there where I myself was engendered." The verb for "engendered," *αερώθη* (*aerōthen*), means literally "plough, till"; its sexual sense is metaphoric. Sophocles is more direct and literal with the same word a few lines later, at 1497-98: "I ploughed where I myself was sown." Oedipus, referring to Jocasta.

¹⁷ . References to the ground in a literary text (e.g., Luke 6:48-49) can almost always be taken in a second, philosophical sense, where "ground" means "foundation" (as in German *Grund*), and the lack of such foundations (say, for mathematics, or for ethics, or for Theism) is *Abgrund*, "Abyss." Milton's acquaintance with the work of the German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) is at work here. See my essay on "Ground in Wittgenstein."



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omniscience: “like one of us man is become.” Instead, eating the fruit merely expels man from his initial state of ignorance, without delivering him into knowledge (as the fallen Adam of *PL X* knows he will die, but has to figure out that “Death comes not at call”). As Plato says in *Symposium*, enlightened man becomes not a god but a philosopher: a lover of wisdom, situated between knowledge and ignorance.

Mankind did *not* eat of the Tree of Life, and yet believing Christians *do* “live for ever, dream at least to live / For ever.” Just as the fruit of the first tree brought doubt and disillusion into the domain of ethics (reducing a prelapsarian ethics of love and decent impulse to a postlapsarian morality of reward and punishment), so the fruit of the second tree would presumably have brought doubt and disillusion into the domain of eschatology. By 1674, something certainly had.

Prior to the Second World War, Milton criticism seems to have emphasized the poet’s prodigious classical and humanistic learning. Christopher Hill’s 1977 *Milton and the English Revolution* supplements this perspective, with a corrective attention to the importance of Milton’s contemporaries in all their ideological variety. Hill portrays the poet as an idiosyncratic chooser among the teeming heresies and innovations current in the English 17th Century. The diversity of this contextual marketplace of ideas is a testimony to the lateness of the times, with competing “world systems” available in nearly everything: astronomy, Christology, sexual mores, economic arrangements.

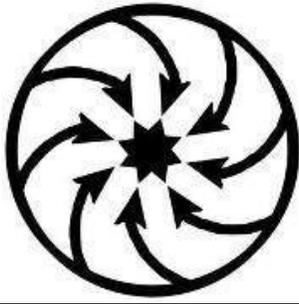
It should also alert us to the way Milton’s actual choices among these orthodoxies and heresies are folded into the most urgent, central aim of his poem: to argue the case that the real God is just; the just God is real. As Harold Skulsky has shown in *Milton and the Death of Man: Humanism on Trial in Paradise Lost*, the narrator Milton’s epic is a kind of courtroom Advocate, a counsel to the divine Defendant (whereas Job has argued as a plaintiff). The poem joins a long tradition of courtroom literature that would seem to include Plato’s

Apology, the interrogation of Jesus in the *Gospels*, the trial on the Heath in *King Lear*, and the enforcement of contract at the end of *Doctor Faustus*.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Milton is committed both to divine foreknowledge and to human freedom. This is why his defense of God comes to grief in the particular way it does (and I find several of my predecessors persuasive on this point, without wanting to reproduce their labors unnecessarily). What’s more important to me is the poet’s need to go beyond prayer and doctrinal commitment to a defense of God (of the legal kind), and the ideologically salient defenses (of the psychic kind) articulated in it. These psychic defenses pervade Milton’s argumentation, informing it, but also vitiating it with glimpses of stubborn truths (that death is real; that the fallibility of human beings applies to revealed religion as well; that Republicans can also be tyrants) beneath his ostensible goals. The stubborn truths, as well as the defenses, help carry the interest of *Paradise Lost* beyond the historically specific doctrines to which its author appeals.

The flux of dogmatic commitment and skeptical reappraisal is as old as doctrinal religion itself, and Milton’s place in it should be understood in the context of the English Civil War, a largely religious conflict between various dissident protestant groups and the British crown. Where James I had sought a peacemaking position between the Anglicanism of the English state and its Catholic opponents in France and Spain, his son and successor Charles exasperated English moderates by excessive flirtation with the Catholic enemy and a dangerous neglect of domestic Protestant interests. To be sure, doubt about the Christian worldview was far older than the Reformation it helped precipitate. Keith Thomas wrote, in his (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*:

One of the most striking features of the spiritual biographies of the time [17th century] is their revelation that atheistical thoughts could trouble even ‘persons of eminent and singular holiness.’ Many future puritan saints seem to have temporarily



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doubted the existence of God and the Devil, the reality of heaven and Hell, and the truthfulness of the Scriptures. This was the case with John Bunyan, Richard Baxter and many other notable believers whose difficulties are known to us because they were recorded and published so as to help others. But incidental evidence suggests that such doubts were widely shared. (Thomas, 199)

There was nothing new about this tendency to doubt the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Many medieval clergy and laity had been beset by overwhelming temptations to blasphemy and atheism, and a wide range of popular skepticism was uncovered by the fifteenth century church courts. Much of it has been wrongly bracketed by historians under the general title of "Lollardry." (199-200)

But in addition to the doubts that lingered from the fierce doctrinal battles of late antiquity (especially the Trinitarian controversy), there was a new impetus for heresy in the uniquely English tension between official Anglican theology and the politically subversive, Puritan alternatives. Religious conflict between groups who allegedly agree on major issues tends to produce a triangulating dissention, as new factions emerge, retrenching upon the area of overlap among earlier factions.¹⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, the breaking of consensus is often more decisive for cultural change than the actual content over which the consensus initially breaks.¹⁹ That Milton knew this, is evidenced by his emphasis on it in God's announcement at V. 610-

¹⁸ . Examples include the emergence of Islam from the bitter Christological struggles within and between Latin and Byzantine Christianities (of which the Monophysite, Monothelete, and Nestorian controversies are only the most famous) or Sikhism from the conflict between Hindu culture and Islam.

¹⁹ . See my "Limitations of Textuality in Thomas More's *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*," 16th Century Journal, Vol. 26.

612: "United as one individual Soule / For ever happie: him who disobeyes / Mee disobeyes, *breaks union...*" A look at Christian doctrinal history (e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan's multi-volume survey of Christian documentary sources) shows that any initial unanimity on the issue of the fate of the soul is a nostalgic illusion of the reader who posits it. But the same history also shows that readers *do* repress the fractious, early roots from which any later consensus is derived, and that all such repressions have their price in the stored frustrations that warp the texts such readers come to write. Like gravity, cognitive dissonance is a force that distorts what it occupies.

MORTALISM

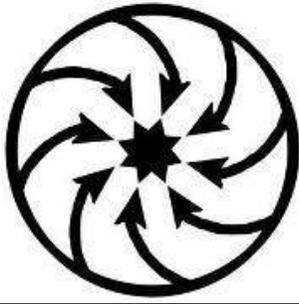
According to Christopher Hill, Milton did not believe that the saved souls of the dead enjoy an eternity of bliss in Heaven; in other words, Milton espoused a form of Mortalism:

There were three variants of the [mortalist] heresy: that the soul sleeps from death until the general resurrection; that it dies with the body but is resurrected at the Last Judgment; or annihilationism, the belief that at death the soul ceases to exist and the body returns to the elements from which it was composed. (Hill, 317)

Milton described the ultimate resurrection of the body as a necessary vindication of God's providence and justice; but his references to it are brief: he gives more space to proving that the soul dies with the body, which seems to interest him more. (317)

So Milton furnishes ample evidence for the conviction that the soul dies with the body: but as for the soul's eventual resurrection, he writes a blank check for the same "necessary vindication of God's providence and justice" with which *Paradise Lost* begins: "assert eternal *providence*, and *justify* the ways of God." Without immortality, the only eternal salvation the Son can provide is that He spares us eternal torture in Hell. Milton's profound

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ambivalence over Mortalism indicates how steeply his doubts inclined toward it. God speaks of fallen man in Book XI. 57-66:

Created him endowed with happiness,
And immortality: that fondly lost,
This other served but to eternize woe;
Till I provided death: so death becomes
His final remedy; and, after life,
Tried in sharp tribulation, and refined
By faith and faithful works, *to second life,*
Waked in the renovation of the just,
Resigns him up with Heaven and Earth renewed.

Like Luther and Tyndale, Milton here espouses the milder form of Mortalism, which lightens the counterintuitive weight of Christian belief by denying that the promised bliss of salvation begins at death, asserting instead that it begins after history is over with.²⁰ The more radical form, annihilationism, is articulated much earlier in the poem, by the devils called Moloch (ll. 84-101) and Belial (ll. 145-186). Moloch's version (like the writings of Milton's contemporaries John Reeve and Lodowick

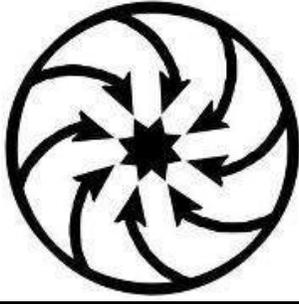
²⁰ . Eschatology, from the Greek *eschaton* ("the furthest-off"), is "the doctrine of the *last* things," meaning, for individuals, simply the afterlife, and for the collective, the Last Judgment at the end of days. But the Mortalist idea that *the individual soul can't start enjoying bliss until history on Earth has ended* represents a collapse of the difference between these two branches of eschatology, a collapse driven by the fierce dichotomy between history and salvation already implicit in the eschatological doctrine of the last judgment. This dichotomy will be treated in later pages. Note that a dreamless sleep of aeons presumably would not be experienced by the sleeper as a duration of waiting; we would feel as if the Last Judgment happened the moment after our death. If this is a correct understanding of Milton's Mortalism, it represents less of a loss than it might at first seem to entail.

Muggleton²¹) looks on annihilation as a relief from eternal torment. Belial's version equivocates between this view and a quietist acceptance of the devils' lot.

Among the stakes of the defenses ranged under the title "Paradise Lost," there is the troubled hope for any afterworld at all, rather than nothing. But Milton's Mortalism seems to show him expecting an oblivious sleep until the Resurrection of the Just at the end of days. Thus Milton's "Mortalism" is neither a thorough denial of death, nor an acceptance, but a kind of inoculation against it: for Milton, we die, but only temporarily; we live again, but only after all of history has elapsed. The poet's hopes appear to be vested in God's justice, rather than in His goodness (i.e., his generosity with abundant life). But even these temperate hopes depend upon a complete split between Milton's politics (regicidal, republican, discursive and communal) and his theology (monarchical in the extreme, demanding utter unanimity from worshipful devotees). Evidently the very big fear that there is no God contains several other fears inside it, besides the dread of mortal annihilation.

God's sovereignty is itself a container for all the moral ambiguity of this world, from predation in the jungle to murder in the street. If He does not exist, the mythic drama of his reign will fail as an explanation of suffering. The autocratic sovereignty Milton despised in the Stuart kings will drop back down from the Heavens where the English Revolution had been projecting it, and fall to earth wherever it may, now on Cromwell and now on Charles. The horror of the reign of Chaos and Night in *PL II* is an expression of Milton's loathing for an England in which chance governs the question of who governs the polity. That Shakespeare had already experienced this same revulsion at the role of chance in the Wars of the Roses, did little to shield Milton from the legitimization crises he lived through. If "all our woe" cannot be traced finally to Satan, it may be God's fault; if God is therefore unjust, he cannot be the just God of the

²¹ . See Christopher Hill, 319-320.



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philosophers, perhaps the only God worthy of worship (by a beneficiary of the humanist English Renaissance). And so the whole story may be false, in which case the source of “all our woe” is, once again, us. Blaming Eve and Adam because they sinned, as Milton does, is a defense against blaming Eve and Adam because there is no one else to blame, as Milton fears doing.

Because its grammatical subject is the *fruit*, the poem’s second line (“whose mortal taste brought death into the world”) obscures the question of just *who it was* that brought death into the world. In passages where death is temporarily considered a Good, God is held responsible for it (e.g. Adam’s soliloquy at the opening of *PL XI*; the speeches of both Moloch and Belial in *PL II*; John Reeve’s 1658 *Joyfull News*, and Muggleton’s 1699 *Acts of the Witnesses of the Spirit*). Conversely, in Milton’s thanatophany of *PL II* 666-787, where Death is the child of Sin and Satan, it is not a Good for men or angels. Instead, it subtends a number of Evils including incest, rape, and dishonor to parents. But when Adam most attributes the advent of Death to *himself* (X. 818-822), something strange happens to Milton’s rhetoric:

Fair Patrimonie

That I must leave ye, Sons! O, were I able
To waste it all myself, and leave ye none!
So disinherited, how would you bless
Me, now your curse!

If God made death, it’s a *scarce good*; if Satan made death, it’s an *abundant evil*; but in this passage, where death seems to come from man, it’s an *abundant evil* that Adam wishes were a *scarce evil* (like the fruit of knowledge he and Eve actually ate), so he could consume it all as if it were a *scarce good* (like the fruit of knowledge Eve had hoped to eat). Repetitions abound, not least among the connotations of “disinherited,” a word Adam applies to his hypothetical progeny inside the counterfactual (“were I able...”) but which might well apply to his real progeny outside it, as well as to Adam himself and to Satan and the rebel angels.

If I am correct in the hypothesis that Milton’s deepest anxiety is the possibility that there is no

mind (divine nor mortal) apart from a living human body, fears about atheism and fears for the future of the soul are facets of this single fear. Hamlet confronts it with a defense that goes like this: life is difficult and unfair, while the only alternative is death. Death may be a nothing, as Epicurus supposed, in which case it’s nothing to fear; and yet it might be some terrible hellish afterlife, in which case leaping into it by killing oneself would be foolish. For Milton, Hamlet’s prophylactic against self-killing will not quite do. It needs to be completed by Belial’s soothing casuistry:

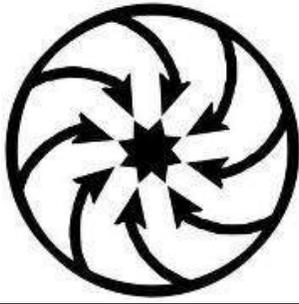
Thus repuls’d, our final hope
Is flat despair; we must exasperate
Th’ Almighty Victor to spend all his rage,
And that must end us, that must be our cure,
[145]

To be no more; sad cure; for who would loose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through Eternity,
To perish rather, swallowd up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated night,
[150]

Devoid of sense and motion? and who knows, **Let this be good, whether our angry Foe Can give it, or will ever?** How he can Is doubtful; that he never will is sure.

All that is needed to appreciate the pathos of this passage is to recall that their author is not an immortal fallen angel but a mortal man. He has found a way to pretend that it is “sure” that oblivion will never befall the mind.

Having considered Milton’s various assignments of the responsibility for death, let’s consider a few more of his assignations. The table below gives a chart of several aspects of *Paradise Lost* listed horizontally: cosmology, economics, theology, eschatology, and morality. The vertical axis runs from the most “residual” to the most “emergent,” terms I have borrowed from the sociology of Raymond Williams. Generally, the emergent elements of Milton’s world get articulated by (or in descriptions of) Satan, the rebel angels, Hell, and fallen Man; whereas residual elements are spoken by or about God, the loyal angels, Heaven, and



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Prelapsarian Man. The deepest anxiety haunting *Paradise Lost* is not so much that Satan may be right (there is that too), but that there may be no Satan who can solve the problem of evil for us.

In his controversy with Abdiel, Satan professes to have grown up spontaneously from the universe. "We know of no time when we were not as we are now." When C.S. Lewis compared Satan's account of his own origins to Topsy's "I just grewed," William Empson pointed out, with admitted anachronism, that Darwin is a considerably more potent representative of this view than Topsy (Empson, 88-89). Emergent knowledge and new meanings tend to destabilize the larger doctrinal system, so Milton must relegate them to the Satanic side of the story, where repression can contain them. The most striking feature of the table below is just this pattern of emergent Satanic features and Divine residual ones. New knowledge can't point toward religious doubt, atheism, enlightenment and disenchantment, because the Christian mythology interposes Satan between those distant possibilities and the subject who tries to think them. "There is no chief," says Faustus, "but only Beelzebub."
(SEE TABLE)

I will now cite some passages that I find evidentiary of this claim. I have isolated or accentuated segments of Milton's lines in ways that sometimes mar the construction (for instance by quoting only one line of an enjambed construction that takes up more than one line). Because the unconscious seems to be somehow prior to or separate from the mental operations by which grammar is negotiated, poets leave unconscious semiosis everywhere they go (everybody does). But poets generally employ a certain amount of this kind of ambiguity quite consciously, too. Rich, multivalent utterances result when smaller grammatical structures are embedded into larger ones.²² The smaller sequences of words continue to make a hidden sense of their own that offsets the sense they make in the larger syntax. The suggestive use of lineation (the placement of

²² . The same principle governs analytic chemistry, where the syntax of smaller molecules remains embedded in larger molecular arrangements.

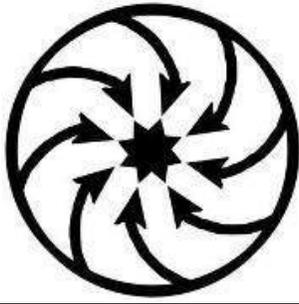
line breaks) is called *enjambment*, an important avenue of insight into the unconscious as it informs a poem.²³

"DARKNESS VISIBLE," l. 61-64:

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round,
As one great furnace flamed; yet from those flames
No light; but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe

This famously strange figure seems to derive from a reversal of the light-mysticism found in *Paradiso*, or in Henry Vaughan's "The Night" ("a deep but dazzling darkness") and which Milton himself practices when he describes God and Heaven: "dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear." Since it's only the appearances that are being described, the reader can make sense of the oxymoron "dark with excessive bright" by referring it to the closing pupil of the observer's eye. By contrast, in

²³ . In Ericksonian hypnosis, the embedded commands and hypnotic suggestions blend into the rest of what the hypnotist says to the patient. The hypnotist "marks" the embedded commands with a subtle marker such as eye contact, smiling, hand gestures, a tilt of the head, or a change in speaking voice. Because grammatical processing seems to be somehow separate from the unconscious, the patient receives commands that don't look like commands except to the unconscious: "What happens when you *just relax and sink into the chair?*" The italics are the marker here. In poetry, enjambment is among the most effective such markers; and what gets marked is not commands, but repressed wishes and fears.



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“darkness visible,” which describes Hell, the lack of light must do what only light actually does (namely, “discover sights”). This is illogical, so our imaginations refer us once more to earthly experience: we see either a merely flickering or a merely dim light, as from flames intermittently bright or inadequately bright, and shelterless in an engulfing dark. Later, we read of “the palpable obscure”:

II. 405-410

...who shall tempt with wandering feet
The dark, unbottomed, infinite Abyss,
And through **the palpable obscure** find out
His uncouth way, or spread his airy flight,
Upborne with indefatigable wings
Over the vast abrupt, ere he arrive
The happy Isle?

When we reach this phrase, we become prepared to take “darkness visible” a bit more seriously. All we know of darkness, including its very definition, tells us that it is neither visible nor palpable. Whereas it's deeply traditional to use synesthesia this way in mystical poetry, Milton is no mystic; he's trying to “justify the ways of God to man,” not dissolve the question into the ineffable. That's why these constructions resonate with unresolved protest at the illogic of the worldview in which I claim Milton felt himself to be imprisoned. Here the *marker* of the repressed is the paradoxical flavor of “darkness visible” and “palpable obscure.” The *referent* is an especially real darkness, so real it can be seen and touched, like an object. The intolerable anxiety is that death may be real; the tolerable metaphor is that darkness may be more substantial than light.

I am psychologizing *Paradise Lost*. To plead instead for a reading of Milton that suspends disbelief and takes him at his word, is to brook his absurdities in expression (as Pound and Eliot refused to do) as well as in ethics (as Shelley and Empson refused to do). Here is Milton's contemporary, Thomas Hobbes:

And words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound are those we call absurd, insignificant, and nonsense. And therefore if a man should talk to me

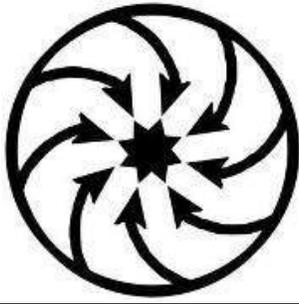
of a round quadrangle; or accidents of bread in cheese; or immaterial substances; or of a free subject; a free will; or any free but free from being hindered by opposition; I should not say he were in an error, but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, absurd.

Actual darkness is neither visible nor palpable to mortals, and there are no immortals to see or feel the darkness if they could. But in every poetic tradition I know of, light is metaphoric for life, and their opposites are darkness and mortality.²⁴ Milton's “darkness visible” is a feature of Hell which we are meant to dread, yet encoded into it is the immortality of the damned which they sometimes bemoan (II, 88-105), and which, I dare guess, Milton still desires. Although his celebrated Mortalism constitutes a valiant attempt to come to terms with the possibility of utter oblivion, it too is a defense, and the poet has folded into it other incompatible defenses. Even if Milton professed to believe that the human soul is not immortal, it seems to me that no man who truly accepts his mortality need posit immortal angels and devils in order to justify the ways of God to man (let alone a bodily “resurrection of the just” at the end of history).

These angels and devils are an indispensable part of Milton's explanation of why God and evil both exist. Insofar as there are no angels, the poem's theodicy is worse than useless to theism. When they prove to be arguing over a poorly handled family quarrel, and God proves to be a destructive father and a tyrannical monarch, Theodicy fails. For many readers of *PL*, the whole edifice of theism caves in with the logical collapse of God's justice. Milton expresses this atheism unconsciously in the metaphors and other rhetorical flora of *Paradise Lost*: “the palpable obscure” is, like “darkness visible,” the kind of oxymoron that marks the spot.²⁵

²⁴ . There may be a deeply archaic connection between the darkness of the night faced by our remote ancestors and the loss of life they sometimes experienced between the end of one day and the beginning of the next.

²⁵ . “Darkness visible” suggests the unconscious,



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When Paul dies in the flesh to live in the spirit, think of the Nixon war machine destroying the village in order to save it. Something must not be admitted, and between us and our interpretive integrity there is inserted a rhetorical knot twisted like some rawhide chewie toy for the intellect to gnaw. Whatever it is which consciousness (as informed by individual pathology and social ideology) cannot admit, is obscure yet palpable; a visible shadow, an unthought knowledge.

"THE DARK, UNBOTTOMED, INFINITE ABYSS," II. 405-407:

who shall **tempt** with wandering feet

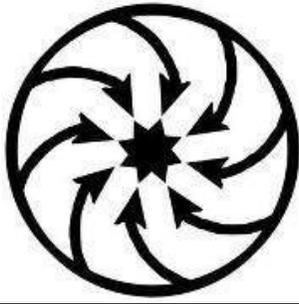
The dark, unbottomed, infinite **Abyss**

"Tempt" may simply mean "attempt," but insofar as Milton's word choice here is an echo of Matthew 4:7 ("thou shalt not *tempt* the Lord thy God,"), the Abyss - and not Satan - takes God's place. At the very least, the verb "tempt" implies that the Abyss has some agency: if the traveler *tempts the abyss* by trying to travel across, *the Abyss will be tempted* to engulf him "ere he arrive / The happy Ile." In other words, he may never arrive, especially across "the dark unbottomed infinite *abyss*," where the definite article is at least as terrifying as the three adjectives (each of which can also be taken as an eerie noun). When Horatio warned Hamlet about the Ghost ("What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord, / Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'er his base into the sea?"), a man warned another man lest a spirit tempt him toward an abysmal fall. Here, in the Miltonic version, a spirit warns other spirits lest they tempt the abyss itself. In the scene from *Hamlet*, part of the problem is the way the ghostly visitation shakes our dispositions "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls."

for instance dreams, which are what we see in darkness. "The palpable obscure" is a strikingly psychoanalytic phrase, resembling for instance Christopher Bollas' category of "the unthought known." It also evokes Freud's classical parapraxis, the slip of the tongue or pen that articulates a Repressed which the subject does not think.

The Ghost subverts the order of nature, in order to visit Hamlet with a subversive politics of legitimation crisis (a secret history of his own assassination). Milton's (vertical) "infinite abyss" is what lies underneath the guiding official mythology (the source of legitimacy). Hamlet the monarchist experiences a political legitimation crisis via regicide, the gap between official stories ("a serpent stung me") and reality ("the serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown"). For the English Revolution (and for Milton the republican, his rebel angels, and for, say, Thom Paine) the threatening abyss is held open by the enormity of residual monarchist (anti-regicidal) ideology in, for instance, Shakespeare's plays (Claudius' regicidal offense is a crime of "*rank*: it smells to heaven"). The Lollards and their English Revolutionary successors see themselves parodied in, for instance, the scenes of Cade's Rebellion in *II Henry VI*. But in addition to the struggle for political legitimacy and its benefits in anxiety reduction (see *Henry V*, "not today, oh Lord, not today"), a metaphysical legitimation crisis dogs every culture that denies the mortality of which King Lear's hand "stinks." It is the scandal whereby all the various Christianities (for which Englishmen continued to kill and die) are seen to hang by a dubious thread: I Corinthians 15:14: "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." ²⁶

²⁶ . Linkages like this one (between the Resurrection and monotheism) make the whole structure more cohesive but more brittle. The Eucharist reinforces the habit of regarding Jesus' body as a miraculous exception to the laws of nature, just as Paul's epistles (and the eventual solutions to the Trinitarian controversy they entailed) make Christology depend on a continual disregard for Jesus' life as a committed human social critic and re-imagine him as God on Earth. Erasmus' return to the Greek text of the Gospels led him to an anti-Pauline position, crucial to his eventual break with Luther: i.e., that *Jesus' life* might have more to offer in the way of instruction than *Christ's death* could offer in



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“UTTER LOSS OF BEING,” II. 438-441:
These passed, if any pass, the void profound
Of unessential Night receives him next,
Wide-gaping, and with **utter loss of being**
Threatens him, plunged in that abortive gulf.

Just as Hamlet briefly entertains the Epicurean position that death is a nothing (hence, nothing to fear), various fallen angels consider in Book I that God might utterly annihilate them if they attempt a new war. But in both texts, this unthinkable possibility is processed right out of the ideological picture, and in the same way: Hell is simply reasserted as God’s worst punitive measure, and we stop worrying about oblivion.²⁷ Although we tend to imagine this as a liberating advantage, Milton makes it seem as though embodiment is almost as much of a problem for the angels as it is for us. To be sure, the narrator is “likening spiritual to corporeal forms,” as per the doctrine of “accommodation” familiar from I. 423-431:

For Spirits, when they please,
Can either sex assume, or both; so soft
And uncompounded is their essence pure,
Not tried or manacled with joint or limb,
Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,
Like cumbrous flesh; but, in what shape they
choose,
Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure,
Can execute their airy purposes,
And works of love or enmity fulfil.

Here is another paragraph of Hobbes that bears on our negotiation of these strange lines:

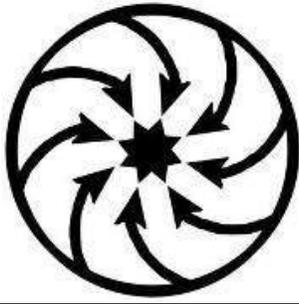
vicarious salvation. This amounts to the commonplace that in accelerating the historical criticism of the Bible, Erasmus became the ancestor of the “demythologizing” movement associated with Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976).

²⁷ . Perhaps the point of positing angels in the first place was to have exemplars of a life outside the body. God creates the angels to enjoy their limits; humanity invents the angels to enjoy their freedom.

Another, when men make a name of two names, whose significations are contradictory and inconsistent; as this name, an incorporeal body, or, which is all one, an incorporeal substance, and a great number more. For whensoever any affirmation is false, the two names of which it is composed, put together and made one, signify nothing at all. For example, if it be a false affirmation to say a quadrangle is round, the word round quadrangle signifies nothing, but is a mere sound. So likewise if it be false to say that virtue can be poured, or blown up and down, the words in poured virtue, inblown virtue, are as absurd and insignificant as a round quadrangle. (*Leviathan*, IV, 18) [Compare *PL VI*, 703-4, “Into thee such Vertue and Grace / Immense I have transfus’d”]

The War in Heaven, the Birth of Sin, and the very Fall with which the poem opens are entirely captive to the logic of embodied persons localized in space. All their pathos is expressed through the vulnerabilities of materially local beings: nobody else can fall through space when thrown (I.50-53), nor plummet when the air under his wings is suddenly withdrawn (II.930-938). Although strictures of usage like those here advocated by Hobbes can be said not to apply to allegories (like Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* III, 12, or Milton’s allegory of Sin and Death in *PL II*), it’s a weightier question whether they must apply to any narrative that pretends to theodicy, as Milton’s poem does in its famous opening’s 26 lines. How will the narrator will go about justifying the ways of God to men? By telling stories about angels. It seems to me that if those stories are logically incoherent because of the metaphysical problems involved in angelology, they will be ill-positioned to solve the cosmic ethical problems to whose solution Milton has set them. The fact that poetry, and not theology, is Milton’s instrument only goes so far to soften this objection. That “likening spiritual to corporeal forms” in which Milton’s narrators engage, merely sequesters the problem posed here, never solving it, nor ever demonstrating that it needs no solution.

Paradise Lost is not the first poem to be stuck with both the imaginary representatives living outside our limitations (“as far as angels ken”) and a recently



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extended version of those limitations (l.288: "Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views"). In his *Antigone*, Sophocles gives the Chorus an ode celebrating man's achievements in invention, medicine, animal husbandry, and government; it ends, "only from death can man devise no escape." What keeps Sophocles' inventive mortals and conservative gods tenable on the same page is the defining difference between them: that gods do not die and human beings die utterly.²⁸

One commonplace of Milton criticism is that the poet gives Satan his due so that God's inevitable victory will be meaningful, but that this grant in the name of fairness somehow gets out of control and Satan is too persuasive. How does this happen? In Milton's story of Satan's rebellion and Fall, the circularities of logic are distributed in a significant pattern:

1. Having enjoyed the unity of a harmonious Heaven for an indefinite period, God makes the first divisive move, his announcement (which turns on the performatives "I declare" "I appoint" and, in a past perfect participle which combines performativity with narrative and command, "I have sworn") at VI 600-615 of the Son and his

sovereignty over everyone except God Himself.

2. Hearing this "high decree" (a word which I believe evoked, in Milton's prodigiously learned mind, Creon's decree from Sophocles' *Antigone*.) Satan experiences his first conscious doubts about God's justice, promptly expressed in a separatist move to a position at "the Quarters of the North," (after *Isaiah* 14:13: "For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, *in the sides of the north*"). This horizontal self-removal from the scene of potential conflict is punished with a vertical, violent one: expulsion and fall.

3. God and Satan each affirm the permanence of their positions, locking them into what we could describe from the subjective side as a "repetition compulsion," or from the objective side as a "feedback loop." This perpetual loop, or feud, is the engine that drives the moral life of the universe.

4. Satan seduces mankind to disobedience.

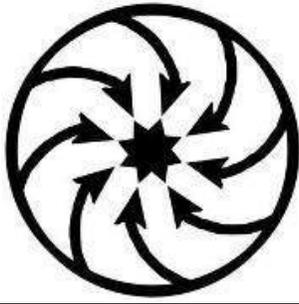
5. God expels mankind from Eden, and man becomes depraved, necessitating the redemption through Christ. Like the Bible, *Paradise Lost* confronts theodicy, the problem of the mystery of God's justice, and this problem proves insoluble.

²⁸ In "To be or not to be," Hamlet briefly takes the apparently pleasant Epicurean position that death is, like sleep, a kind of nothing, and therefore nothing to fear. But then he considers that death may be worse than nothing, just as sleep can be either (for instance) dreamless oblivion or an ineluctable nightmare. The problem with nightmare is that nobody can interpret his way out of it until it's over with, and Hell is never over with. The unending but unreal nightmare of Hell is all that the superego demands which we cannot perform and all we've done already that we cannot answer for. It constrains our free will, giving our lives limit, shape, and meaning, but also painfully confining us: "O God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

Now, theodicy is the conflict among these three propositions:

- a) God is omnipotent.
- b) God is omnibenevolent.
- c) Evil is real.

Any two will make sense without the third, but our world somehow (according to *Paradise Lost* and to monotheism in general) has all three. Anxiety about theodicy, the fear that God may be unjust, may mask anxiety about atheism, the deeper fear that there is no God—no personal yet supernatural and bodiless individual who knows all, yet remains free; who can do anything, and yet does just what the Bible describes. The quiet, sometimes unthinkable notion that there are no devils, nor any angels, nor a God, but only vastness and infinitesimals (and all between), the marvels and horrors of sublimity disclosed by the recent advent of the telescope and the microscope, would seem to be the unreachable heart of Milton's rhetorical vortex. He does manage



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brilliantly to “assert Eternal Providence,” but remains unable to “Justify the ways of God to Man,” justification being so much harder than assertion, as Nietzsche taught: “making moral claims is as easy as giving grounds for them is difficult.”

As for rhetoric and the question of its value, in 1967 Stanley Fish published *Surprised By Sin*, a brilliant reading of *Paradise Lost* in which the Satanic case is overcome by its own strength, since for Fish, Milton was righteously contemptuous of persuasive rhetoric, and it is only at the rhetorical level that Satan appears to triumph. If Puritan readers hope for salvation, they must resist Satan’s blandishments most when those are the most persuasive, since it is only the progress of Satan in our minds that makes us susceptible to his persuasion in the first place. Though Professor Fish is surely right about the reader’s need to hold rhetoric in suspicion (especially rhetoric from a literary character bearing Satan’s name), I suggest that (1) this suspicion applies just as cogently to God’s utterances in the poem, including this one at V 600-615, which everyone hears. As Polonius says “Madam, I swear I use no art at all,” or as Socrates denies being “at all a clever speaker,” God can be expected to recede from, or erase, the rhetorical character of his own utterance. Rather than make his God deny being a rhetorician, Milton can rely on circumambient texts of the 16th (Stephen Hawes, Erasmus) and 17th Century thinkers to declare that logic is divine and rhetoric Satanic. When Fish explains that “Ingrate” in III, 98 “is not a judgment, but a scientific notation with the emotional value of an X or a Y,” one trembles at the collapse of the distinction between fact and value: it is all just too familiar. From Stalinist show trials and Maoist denunciation hearings (“even the blind can see this guilt”), to *The Warren Report* (“you’ll just have to rely on the stature of the men on the Commission”), this is the logic of autocratic jurisprudence everywhere.

Heaven Is Inherently Ahistorical

As yet this world was not, and Chaos wild

Reigned where these Heavens now roll, where

Earth now rests

Upon her center poised; when on a day
(For time, though in eternity, applied
To motion, measures all things durable
By present, past, and future,) on such day
As Heaven’s great year brings forth, the empyreal
host

Of Angels by imperial summons called,
Innumerable before the Almighty’s throne
Forthwith, from all the ends of Heaven, appeared
Under their Hierarchs in orders bright:
Ten thousand thousand ensigns high advanced,

Standards and gonfalons ‘twixt van and rear
590

Stream in the air, and for distinction serve

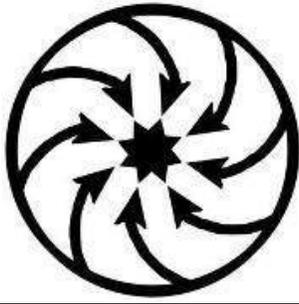
Of hierarchies, of orders, and degrees;
Or in their glittering tissues bear emblazed
Holy memorials, acts of zeal and love
Recorded eminent.

Thus Milton invests Heaven with a secret history. We never do learn quite what these “acts of zeal and love” involved (apart from love and zeal). Milton never returns to these pictured deeds to specify who did what to whom, on what occasion. There were painted deeds in the *Aeneid*, which Virgil’s hero confronted on his arrival in Carthage; panels in the interior of Queen Dido’s palace, which depicted Aeneas’ own deeds at Troy. In a similar way, Helen weaves a visual depiction of the events of the war in *Iliad* III, 125. But these are events of current affairs; Aeneas has just recently escaped the burning Troy when he sees the event as art on Dido’s walls; Helen is presumably looking over the battlements as she works, to see what to weave next. Milton’s angelic standards and gonfalons are something else. They endow Heaven with a past, without requiring the narrator to disclose or formulate it.

Standards and gonfalons ‘twixt van and rear
590

Stream in the air, and for distinction serve

Of hierarchies, of orders, and degrees;
Or in their glittering tissues bear emblazed



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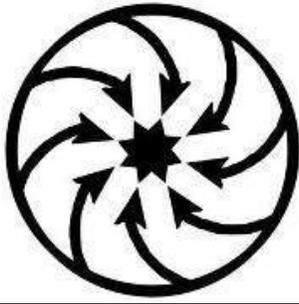
Holy memorials, acts of zeal and love
Recorded eminent.

This passage begins with one of those Miltonic deployments of the reader's expectations of the kind described by Stanley Fish in his remarkable *Surprised By Sin* (1967). The poet starts by telling us that the streaming standards serve for *distinction of hierarchies*, but then a disjunction is introduced where an entirely different kind of banner (also, Milton may have played on various meanings of the word "standard" here) appears beside the hierarchical kind. There is the temptation to regard the "acts of zeal and love" (depicted, or otherwise memorialized, on the *second* kind of banner) as contributory to the *justice* of the "Hierarchies... Orders, and Degrees" denoted in the *first* kind of banner. Such a scheme would alleviate any ethical issues that might arise from the sheer fact of hierarchy in Heaven. Following Stanley Fish, we can go on to surmise that Milton wants us to catch ourselves in the act of seeking grounds for the Degrees and Hierarchies of angelic authority. At this point, says Christian doctrine (according to Fish, and I agree,) we are to remonstrate with ourselves, and stop prying into God's ways. And indeed, caught as we are in the Puritan domain that governs the narrator's project, we catch ourselves asking seditious questions about whether the Hierarchies are legitimate, and what the basis of these Hierarchies, or for that matter the occasion of their expression in action, could possibly be. One natural answer is, "why, the action in the poem!" Good: but it all happens after an indefinite period of peace and Heavenly concord has already elapsed. Hierarchies exist as the consequence of scarcity: but there is no scarcity in Heaven, so how can there be hierarchies? Thom Paine argued in *The Rights of Man* that all monarchies and aristocracies are only the echoing consequences of old violence; there had been no violence in Heaven, how can there be hierarchies?

It would seem from our experience in the mortal, human world that any complexity in interpersonal relationships (for instance "Hierarchies" or "acts of zeal and love") can only arise from a politics, from a

coordination of an array of diverse projects and diverse interests. But in Milton's Heaven (prior to a special, initiating event, namely God's announcement at V 600-15; see below), among the Angels, nobody has any personal interest distinct from the interest of his neighbor. It's hard to see how deeds of "zeal and love" could emerge from a background of such unwavering uniformity; or how some angelic deeds could stand out as more memorable than others, so as to appear on banners like those described in the poem. As the political philosopher and historian Jiwei Ci has pointed out in his 1994 *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, It takes only a moment's reflection to realize that complete altruism, as opposed to limited altruism, makes no sense as a principle for regulating the relations among individuals. For complete altruism, in enjoining everyone to take as one's sole duty the promotion of the interests of others, sets up a moral world in which no one has any interest for anyone else to promote. (129-130)

The lines about heavenly banners depicting "acts of zeal and love" are, strictly speaking, ekphrastic; they depict works of art other than *Paradise Lost* itself. Just as the surviving Homeric corpus asserts the existence of other Greek hexameter epic poems on related stories which Homer *mentions but does not narrate* and which we do not have, so Milton couches his epic (which has to perform this function for itself) in a field of analogous works of art that do not exist, and that serve this environing purpose merely by being indicated as possible. Mortals don't know these stories of angelic, Prelapsarian "acts of zeal and love," but if we did, Milton might write about them, too. They are "Holy Memorials," that are "recorded eminent," but this record is merely attested by the poem, and never related (rather like the songs of Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" or Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer" in "Kublai Khan"). It's a big problem for Heaven if there's no history, because uninterrupted blissful worship might be said to suffer from a deficit of meaning. For all the transgressive, unanimity-violating, violence-circulating mess of Satan's rebellion, it sure gives rise to a lot of goals, purposive actions, and meanings (which is, presumably, the reason why



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God permits it). Here in ll.590-595, we are being assured that prior to the Rebellion, Heaven did not lack for events, that there was a life being lived, but we are not given an account of it. Like the epic *nostoi* of the other Homeric heroes (besides Odysseus, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Nestor)—or like the unreleased files of an agency whose continuous legitimation depends upon the continued suppression of those files—this is an effectively empty placeholder in the poem, a non-solution to various logical *aporias* presented to Milton by his doctrinal commitments.

The majority of angelic action depicted by Milton is Postlapsarian, including the Council in the North, the War in Heaven, the Expulsion and spatial Fall. We can expect such action to be eventful; Milton is at his best here, because Milton is a human being, and postlapsarian narrative is our forte. The remainder is Prelapsarian, and it is characterized by a special kind of engagement with a discreet set of theological problems involved in the Christian idea of Heaven Milton articulated. Among these problems is the nettlesome requirement that all experience in Heaven prior to the Fall was of a uniformly blissful character. If we are committed to the belief that angels loyal to God are in a constant state of maximal bliss, it might be difficult to say just what's *going on* during all this undifferentiated time. How does time transpire, or make its passage evident, in a domain where nobody is mortal? In such a polity, no one has any purposive project to pursue, and all rejoice and repose in unceasing worship of the Ruler. Jiwei Ci continues:

A world of complete altruists requires at least one non-altruist to make their altruism meaningful, and they will be prepared to act as complete altruists only if the one non-altruist succeeds at disguising himself as the collective and the collective ideal. (130)

God can do this quite easily; his authorship of men and angels (and his foundation of the world's continued existence) combines with his stewardship over them to produce an unimpeachable claim upon their loyal submission. The Incarnation makes God a suffering human being who (somehow) takes on

the sins and the suffering of everyone else. As Oedipus says in his first soliloquy of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*: "the pain of all comes into one." As Rene Girard has argued in *Violence and the Sacred*, Paul can assimilate Christ the King and Jesus the scapegoat into a single figure because they share the same underlying structure of group projection.

In *Antigone*, Haemon reproaches Creon "There is no city of a single man.... By yourself, you might rule a vacant country very well." Cassius asks Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:

When went there by an age, since the great flood,

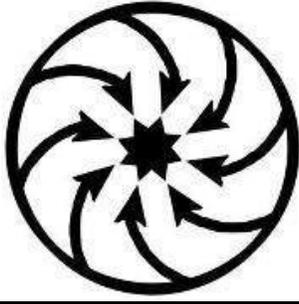
But it was famed with more than with one man?
160

When could they say till now, that talk'd of Rome,

That her wide walls encompass'd but one man?
Now is it Rome indeed and room enough,
When there is in it but one only man.

When the central, dominant non-altruist begins to lose his legitimacy, the difference in kind which has made him preeminent begins to disappear—but God is unique in that He cannot suffer this fate (see Abdiel's speech). His Son can, but with the new dispensation, anyone who is less than fully worshipful of the Son is to be damned eternally, and this tends to militate against criticism, let alone impeachment. This is the crux of Milton's strange pair of antithetical attitudes: support for regicide in England, and for absolute, hereditary monarchy in Heaven. Book II line 309, "By Merit more than Birthright Son of God," is the poet's attempt to address this issue, but it turns upon the claim that all the Son's sacrifice solves everything. He undertakes it because, as he insists in *PL* III, God's goodness is at risk of being impaired:

Or shall the [Adversarie](#) thus obtain
His end, and frustrate thine, shall he fulfill
His malice, and thy goodness bring to naught,
Or proud return though to his heavier doom,
Yet with revenge accomplish't and to Hell [160]
Draw after him the whole Race of mankind,
By him corrupted? or wilt thou thy self



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[Abolish thy Creation](#), and unmake,
For him, what for thy glorie thou hast made?
So should thy goodness and thy greatness both
[165]
Be questiond and blasphem'd without defence.

Aspiring Pride

It makes no sense to tell Faustian stories in Ancient Greek religion, because the gods never claim to deliver us from death in exchange for epistemic conservatism: that just isn't the promise on which to default. When relations do break down between human beings and the gods, as in *Symposium*, the problem is not that people know too much; the problem is that Aristophanes' circle-people have too many limbs and too much (erotic) energy. They take to much, and transgress the gods' will, and Zeus cuts them in half, from four legs to two. Then he threatens that further rebellion will be punished with further bisection, and we can all hop around on one leg. The punishment is a geometrical demotion, from four legs down to half that number; it is not a demotion from infinity to finitude, nor from immortality to death. With the Christian God things are different.

"*Geometry they have thought conjuring.*" --Hobbes,
Leviathan I, 5 p.22 c.1650
DOCTOR FAUSTUS

Literary criticism is interesting insofar as it helps us either to read literature or to live our lives. My efforts to respond to *Paradise Lost* point backward to Aeschylus' meditation on divine sovereignty, the *Prometheus Bound*. They also point forward, to the ironies of American political repression and its attendant culture of intellectual orthodoxy. But a nearer historical neighbor of *Paradise Lost* encodes our Miltonic issues with a native Englishness and an Elizabethan rhetorical pyrotechnics only available in Shakespeare's lifetime. On its surface, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* appears to be a working-up of medieval materials from morality plays and pageants (the seven deadly sins, the Good Angel and the Bad Angel, tempting devils, antagonism between Pope and Emperor). R. M. Dawkins once called it "the story of a Renaissance man who had

to pay the medieval price for being one." But perhaps that "price" is not so securely confined to the medieval period as it might seem.

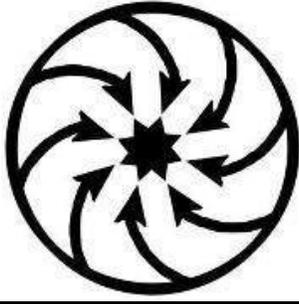
The Privy Council Register for 29 July, 1587 records the intercession of three prominent men (the Lord Archbishop, the Lord Chancellor of the Realm, the Lord Treasurer and the Controller) in the affairs of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. They urged that "Christopher Morley" [sic] not be opposed in his upcoming bid for graduation. Whereas certain rumors suggested that young Marlowe had permanently absconded to the Catholic mainland "there to remain," he had in fact "behaved himself orderly and discreetly whereby he had done her Majesty good service, and deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing." These officials communicated the will of her Majesty through the Privy Council, lest Marlowe's degree suffer unfairly the effect of those rumors. "It was not her Majesty's pleasure that any one employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant in the affairs he went about."²⁹

J. B. Steane's excellent 1962 monograph, *Marlowe*, includes the following reasonable remarks:

The probability is that Marlowe had come to the attention of those who ran the secret service, and had been sent to Rheims, where the English Catholics had their seminary. In 1581, the government had issued a proclamation 'recalling Her Majesty's subjects which under pretence of studies do live beyond the seas both contrary to the laws of God and of the realm, and against such as do receive or retain Jesuits and massing priests, sowers of sedition and of other treasonable attempts.' (11-12)

Was [Marlowe] a government agent? Thomas Walsingham was his friend and patron, and Francis

²⁹ This is the same kind of documentary trace as Oswald's discharge from the Marines, which exonerated him of any misconduct in contracting urethritis, stating that he had done so "in line of duty, not due to own misconduct." See Anthony Summers, *Conspiracy*, p. 126



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Walsingham was chief of the security service. If so, was he murdered so that government secrets should not come to light in any public trial? The other men at Deptford [where Marlowe was killed in a fight] had suspicious records and had associations with the Walsinghams too. (24)

Marlowe was, as Peter Dale Scott once called him, "definitely a deep politics hero."³⁰ In his *Doctor Faustus* he encoded a subtle but unmistakable message to those who had ears to hear it: sovereignty of every kind is a performance; there is neither devil nor God nor any afterlife. The kings and emperors and popes of the play are troubled fools with whom Faustus dallies, and among the hero's fantasies is the desire to "learn the secrets of all foreign kings." Having seen the dirty, deep-political underside of the monarchy's sovereignty and thrown himself into its workings, the 29 year old author could well appreciate the predicament of Wittenberg's venturesome professor who contracts with the devil. Just as Kit Marlowe moved among the Catholics of French Rheims undetected in his secret allegiance to the British crown, Faustus is invisible at the Papal court, snatching dishes before the Archbishop of Rheims. Kings and Popes alike are lying pragmatists, so the sovereignty of human authorities comes in for the usual comic ironies about the flesh-and-blood mortals who presume to wear the crown and the mitre. But it is God's sovereignty that Marlowe dismisses in the astronomy lesson of *Doctor Faustus*.

Faust.

But is there not *Coelum igneum*, & *Christalinum* [a Heaven of fire and crystalline]?

Meph.

No Faustus they be but Fables.

Marlowe here establishes that there is a category called the fabulous, comprising all that used to be sovereign but has since fallen into discredit. Once that category has been opened, it begins to fill up: the crystal spheres first; eventually, God and the devil and hell. When Faustus says "I think Hell's a fable," Mephistopheles replies ominously, "Aye, think so still, till experience change thy mind." But

we know that this is theater, and not experience: an actor plays Mephistopheles. The same signifiers that terrify the faithful secretly affirm the dissidents in their skepticism.

Meph.

So, now Faustus aske me what thou wilt.

Faust.

First, I will question thee about hell:

Tell me, where is the place that men call Hell?

Meph.

Vnder the heauens.

Faust.

I, so are all things else; but whereabouts

Meph.

Within the bowels of these Elements,
Where we are tortur'd, and remaine for euer.

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd,

In one selfe place: but where we are is hell,

And where hell is there must we euer be

And to be short, when all the world dissolues,

And euery creature shall be purifi'd,

All places shall be hell that is not heauen.

Faust.

I thinke Hel's a fable.

Meph.

I, thinke so still, till experience change thy mind.

Faust.

Why, dost thou think that Faustus shall be damn'd?

Meph.

I, of necessity, for here's the scrowle

In which thou hast giuen thy soule to Lucifer

Meph.

I, and body too, but what of that:

Think'st thou that Faustus, is so fond to imagine,

That after this life there is any paine?

No, these are trifles, and meere old wiues Tales.

Meph.

But I am an instance to proue the contrary:

For I tell thee I am damn'd, and now in hell.

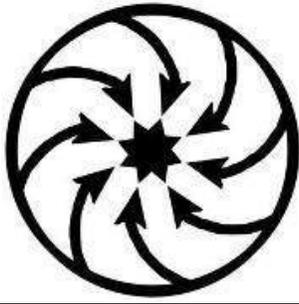
Faust.

Nay, and this be hell, I'le willingly be damn'd.

What sleeping, eating, walking and disputing?

Students never fail to notice that Faustus' position here is absurd: one cannot simultaneously disbelieve in Hell and damnation with its devils, and

³⁰ Email correspondence with the author.



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also sign a contract with them (binding or not). Is excessive pride an adequate answer for our puzzlement at the stupidity of Faustus' procedure? The first 100 lines of the drama train us to revere Faustus for wisdom and insight, but here he is foolish. Under the protagonist's blind-spot is the author's subterfuge: as Faustus sells his soul to a devil while denying that Hell exists, the crypto-atheist Marlowe writes a Christian drama (as though selling his integrity, as he sold it to the British Crown) in which religion triumphs. The plot leaves unoccupied the position Marlowe found most attractive: that there is nothing to conjure and nothing to pray to. In the last moments, Faustus yearns for alternatives to the endless damnation upon which the plot insists:

Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of heaven.
No? Then will I headlong run into the earth.
Gape, earth! O no, it will not harbour me.
You stars that reigned at my nativity,
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,
Now draw up Faustus like a foggy mist,
Into the entrails of yon labouring cloud,
That when you vomit forth into the air,
My limbs may issue from your smokey mouths,
But let my soul mount, and ascend to heaven.

The watch strikes.

O, half the hour is past! 'Twill all be past anon.
O, if my soul must suffer for my sin,
Impose some end to my incessant pain.
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be saved.
No end is limited to damned souls.
Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
Or why is this immortal that thou hast?
Oh Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true,
This soul should fly from me, and I be changed
Into some brutish beast.

All beasts are happy, for when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolved in elements,
But mine must live still to be plagued in hell.
Cursed be the parents that engendered me;
No, Faustus, curse thyself. Curse Lucifer
That hath deprived thee of the joys of heaven.

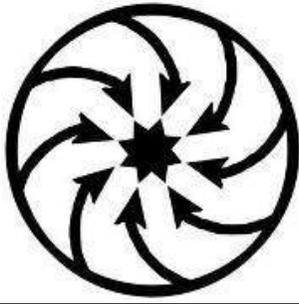
The clock strikes twelve

It strikes, it strikes! Now body turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell.
O soul be changed into small water drops,
And fall into the ocean ne'er be found.

Earth, air, and water, to which Faustus appeals as havens for his threatened soul, are customary ways of disposing of a *body* (fire is left out of account, perhaps because this is the element Faustus has most to fear from in Hell). It is a very strange thing to wish to dispose of the *soul* by means of those elements. The result is that Faustus, in praying for a limit to the duration of his terrible afterlife ("No end is limited to damned souls"), prays for the same conditions the rest of us struggle to accept: "All beasts are happy, for when they die, / Their souls are soon dissolved in elements." In Plato's *Phaedo*, on the contrary, this "dissolving" is exactly what Socrates' friends, Simias and Cebes, fear most.

What more evocative picture of the desirability of oblivion could there be than this: "O soul be changed into small water drops, / And fall into the ocean ne'er be found." How striking is this image of the dissolving water droplets! In the *Upanishads*, where personal immortality is undesirable, peace is pictured as just such a watery merging with the enduring universe. Faustus asks himself rhetorically, "Or why is this [soul] immortal that thou hast?" Accusatory documents like the 1593 "Remembrances Against Richard Cholmeley" have us imagine Marlowe asking this same question of his interlocutors, with considerable suasion and none of the futility of Faustus' "desperate lunacy." The Remembrances, probably written by Thomas Drury, assert of Cholmeley "That he saith & verely beleveth that one Marlowe is able to shoue more sounde reasons for Atheisme then any devine in Englande is able to geve to prove devinitie & that Marloe tolde him that hee hath read the Atheist lecture to Sir walter Ralieghe & others." Why is the soul immortal? Well, it isn't.

Also dated to May of 1593 is the similar report of one Richard Baines to the authorities, concerning Marlowe: "These thinges, with many other shall by good & honest witnes be aproved to be his opinions and Comon Speeches, and that this Marlow doth not only hould them himself, but almost into every Company he Cometh he perswades men to



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Atheism willing them not to be afeard of bugbeares and hobgoblins, and vtterly scorning both god and his ministers as I Richard Baines will Justify...”

Thus the Baines document evokes that famous passage of the *Phaedo* where Socrates, who must die, comforts his friends, who must live:

Still I suspect that you and Simmias would be glad to probe the argument further; like children, you are haunted with a fear that when the soul leaves the body, the wind may really blow her away and scatter her; especially if a man should happen to die in stormy weather and not when the sky is calm.

Cebes answered with a smile: Then, Socrates, you must argue us out of our fears and yet, strictly speaking, they are not our fears, but there is a child within us to whom death is a sort of hobgoblin; him too we must persuade not to be afraid when he is alone with him in the dark.

Where Socrates reassured his friends that the soul is immortal, and need not fear dissolution, Marlowe is using the idea of dissolution as a merciful reprieve from damnation.

There was once a harmony of expression and imagery between Ptolemaic astronomy and the Church; Dante exemplified it. Medieval dissidents of Dante's time defied this accord to their own undoing, until the scientific revolution shattered it forever, making the earth no longer central to the shapeless and borderless cosmos.³¹ This is why, if Marlowe is to present so medieval a subject as the Faustus legend, he must establish that God and Hell may be real in spite of the break between science and the world picture cherished by the Church. Dante had placed Hell at the center of the earth, and at first Mephistopheles seems to agree, placing it “within the bowels of these Elements.” With the anatomical dimension of this phrase (Hell is up the world's ass) comes the implication that Dante and Aquinas and Ptolemy are still correct about the layout of the world. In the same breath, however, our devil insists that “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd, / In one self place: but where we are is hell, / And where hell is there must we ever be.” This disavowal of the old spatial model

³¹ See Alexander Koyre, *From Closed World to Infinite Universe*.

(“Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it”) is the necessary prelude to the astronomy lesson which so thoroughly undermines that model. If *Doctor Faustus* is to be put on the stage, Christianity must triumph in it, and the orthodox cosmology ought to be credited as well. But Marlowe's genius is to decouple them and let each fail on its own, while successfully disguising the failure as triumph. Though Faustus is damned for his sin, and God is in his heaven, this is only at the play's surface, and Marlowe also wrote at an esoteric depth available to kindred spirits like Raleigh and Harriot, sophisticates for whom Christianity is the loser in the drama.

Come Mephostophilis let vs dispute againe
And reason of divine Astrology.
Speake, are there many Spheares about the
Moone?

Are all Celestiall bodies but one Globe,
As is the substance of this centricke earth?

Meph.

As are the elements, such are the heauens,
Euen from the Moone vnto the Emperiall Orbe,
Mutually folded in each others Spheares,
And iontly moue vpon one Axle-tree,
Whose termine, is tearmed the worlds wide Pole.
Nor are the names of Saturne, Mars, or Iupiter,
Fain'd, but are euening Starres.

Faust.

But haue they all one motion, both *situ* & *tempore*?

Meph.

All moue from East to West in foure and
twenty houres, vpon the poles of the world, but
differ
in
their motions vpon the poles of the Zodiacke.

Faust.

These slender questions Wagner can decide:

Hath Mephostophilis no greater skill?

Who knowes not the double motion of the Planets?

That the first is finisht in a naturall day?

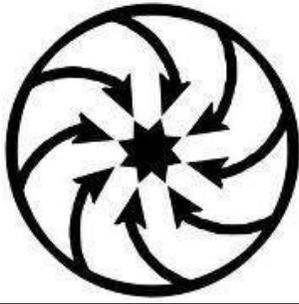
The second thus, Saturne in 30 yeares;

Iupiter in 12, Mars in 4, the Sun, Venus, and

Mercury in a yeare; the Moone in twenty eight
daies.

These are fresh mens questions : But tell me, hath
euery

Spheare a Dominion, or *Intelligentia*?



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Meph.

I.
Faust.
How many Heauens, or Spheares, are there?

Meph.
Nine, the seuen Planets, the Firmament, and the Emperiall heauen.

Faust.
But is there not *Coelum igneum*, & Christalinum?

Meph.
No Faustus they be but Fables.

Faust.
Resolue me then in this one question:
Why are not Coniunctions, Oppositions, Aspects,
Eclipses,
all at one time, but in some years we haue more, in
some lesse?

Meph.
Per inaequalem motum, respectu totius.

Faust.
Well, I am answer'd: now tell me who made the
world?

Meph.
I will not

Faust.
Sweet Mephostophilis tell me.

Meph.
Moue me not Faustus.

Faust.
Villaine, haue not I bound thee to tell me any thing?

Meph.
I, that is not against our Kingdome.
This is: Thou art damn'd, think thou of hell.

Faust.

Thinke Faustus vpon God, that made the world.

Meph.
Remember this. -- *Exit.*

Just as in political terror, loss of sovereignty generally entails loss of existence altogether. John Keats wrote the long poems "Hyperion" and "the Fall of Hyperion" to explore this issue, and he showed the demotion of a god from archaic power to weakness and oblivion. The poems suggest a corresponding change in the human beings on the scene, in whose esteem poor Hyperion has fallen: though they turn to worship someone else (here, Apollo) they also slide from piety to nihilism. The Ghost of Hamlet the Elder is played by Shakespeare at the Globe around 1601; Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, *The Ptolemaic and the Copernican* is published 1632; *Paradise Lost* in 1667. These are links in a chain of sovereignty literature; they share a kind of family resemblance with the English Revolution. In each of these texts, someone or something sovereign is deposed, so that a new occupant seizes the top position, transforming it. In *Hamlet*, the murdered King haunts the stage as the repressed; in Galileo's book, what is repressed but as plain as the Ghost is the author's preference for the Copernican system, despite the impartiality Galileo puts on in an effort to mollify the Censor. Christopher Marlowe may have flaunted his atheism on occasion, but in *Doctor Faustus* it remains deftly hidden from the sort of people who would object to it. Instead, Marlovian atheism inheres in the rivalry between the two Popes; in the use of the verb "live" in Faustus' last soliloquy; in the linkage between the propositions that the crystal spheres are a fable (which the plot bears out) and that "Hell's a fable" (which it doesn't). If one reads the play with a copy of the Baines document open on the desk, the irreligion seems to leap from every line. In *Paradise Lost*, conversely, Milton has hidden irreligion even from himself.