

Milton's Allegory

Personification and Adaptation in *Paradise Lost*

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Chapter I

Molding the Agent *Sin and Death as 'Real Existences'*

Milton's allegory of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*—his introducing abstract ideas as agents in the world of his epic—provoked a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics to claim that these vigorously personified beings have no place in the poem. Most of the debate centers on the interaction of Sin and Death with Satan in Book II, but some readers also question later involvement of the characters as physical beings in the poem—for instance, when Sin and Death travel to Eden after Adam and Eve have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge.¹ Although he does not refer specifically to *Paradise Lost*, Lord Kames best captures the opinion of the critics who found fault with the allegory:

The impression of real existence, essential to an epic poem, is inconsistent with that figurative existence which is essential to an allegory; and therefore no means can more effectively prevent the impression of reality, than to introduce allegorical beings co-operating with those whom we conceive to be really existing.²

The basis of Kames' claim rests upon the assumption that an epic poem should mirror—or at least convey—a certain “real existence.” Presumably, this representation should be reality as we humans know it: a natural world, which exists outside the human body, governed by a specific set of laws and expectations; an environment where every individual possesses the same basic skills, and no one exhibits supernatural power. One needs only to examine any of several landscapes (Heaven or Hell, for instance) or characters (such as God, Satan, or Raphael) in *Paradise Lost* to conclude that the epic does *not* exhibit reality as we know it.

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book X: 585-590. (All future references will appear as *PL*.)

² Lord Henry Home of Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, p. 394.

Earth does not possess the same natural properties as either Milton's Heaven or Hell. Nowhere on earth, for example, can one find a staircase that's only visible sporadically,³ or "a bright Sea [that] flow'd / Of Jasper, or of liquid Pearl."⁴ Both these qualities of Heaven violate not only the laws of our universe (matter cannot phase in and out of existence), but the natural state of earth's landscape (a sea's composition is water, not "Jasper"). Likewise, where but in Hell is there a "burning Lake"⁵ or a "boiling Ocean,"⁶ and an entrance whose gates are "impal'd with circling fire, / Yet unconsum'd"? As if it were not fantastic enough—and unlike anything on earth—for the Gates of Hell to be surrounded by fire, Milton takes the image a step further: the gates are not affected by the fire; they remain "unconsum'd" by it. This kind of phenomenon does not exist in our reality.

Beyond landscape, the characters in *Paradise Lost* are certainly like none we meet on earth. Only in Milton's world do we encounter the greater being who created us, for example. In describing God in Book III, Milton paints the image of an existence unlike any with whom we interact:

Fountain of Light, thyself invisible
 Amidst the glorious brightness where thou sit'st
 Thron'd inaccessible, but when thou shad'st
 The full blaze of thy beams, and through a cloud
 Drawn round about thee like a radiant Shrine,
 Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear,
 Yet dazzle Heav'n, that brightest Seraphim
 Approach not, but with both wings veil thir eyes.⁷

³ "Each Stair mysteriously was meant, nor stood / There always, but drawn up to Heav'n sometimes / Viewless..." (*PL*, Book III: 516-518).

⁴ *PL*, Book III: 518-519.

⁵ *PL*, Book I: 210.

⁶ *PL*, Book II: 183.

⁷ *PL*, Book III: 375-383.

This passage immediately sets God apart from humans: simply put, our bodies do not emit visible light. Furthermore, the phrase “thyself invisible” suggests that the true being of God cannot be seen by anyone—even his angels, who must use “both wings [to] veil thir eyes” whenever they approach “that brightest Seraphim.” Although the human “self”—the soul or the core of our beings—is not visible to others, our bodies certainly are. If we are to accept the world Milton creates in his epic, we must first set aside our belief that a being of pure light cannot exist.

Kames asserts that an element central to allegory is a “figurative existence.” Critics in his corner contend that Sin and Death, figurative characters created through personification, do not belong in the mimetic world of the epic poem. In conveying the thoughts of Kames and Joseph Addison, Steven Knapp sums up this point best: “Personifications are dangerous not because they are incredible in themselves, but because they undermine the credibility of the agents with which they interact.”⁸ How is the presence of a fully-developed character named Sin—the representation of man’s capacity to sin—any different from a character named Satan—the embodiment of the presence of evil? Samuel Johnson claims that

Milton’s allegory of Sin and Death is undoubtedly faulty. Sin is indeed the mother of Death, and may be allowed to be the portress of hell; but when they stop the journey of Satan, a journey described as real, and when Death offers him battle, the allegory is broken.⁹

Like Kames, Johnson worries about the intrusion of allegorical or figurative characters upon the “real existences” depicted in the poem. It is when Sin and Death “stop the journey of Satan” that Johnson finds fault with the allegory. He has no apparent problem,

⁸ Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime*, p. 62.

⁹ Knapp, pp. 185-186.

however, with Satan as a real, non-figurative agent. Because Satan's journey from Hell to Heaven is "described as real," Johnson concludes that Satan himself must be real—within the world of the poem. Are not Sin's and Death's presence in the poem "described as real" also? What is the factor that distinguishes the character of Satan from those of Sin and Death? And what makes the story of Sin and Death allegorical? Milton, either as outside narrator or through the eyes of the characters in his epic, describes the ontology of all three agents—that of Death being harder to imagine than either Satan or Sin¹⁰—yet Johnson and others call Sin and Death "intruder[s] in the essentially realistic space of the epic."¹¹

It seems the only problem these critics have with the allegory of Sin and Death is that it does not operate with the rest of the poem. Or, as Addison puts it: "I cannot think that Persons of such a chymical Existence are proper Actors in an Epic Poem; because there is not that Measure of Probability annexed to them, which is requisite in Writings of this Kind ..."¹² Addison's claim is clearly grounded in Aristotle's notion of mimesis, which holds that tragedy and epic should present probable actions and characters.¹³ Manifestations such as Sin and Death are certainly "chymical," improbable beings in *our* world. But what about the world of *Paradise Lost*? In order to achieve some kind of acceptance of the poem—as an accurate imagining of the fantastic realm created by Milton—must a reader not set aside personal beliefs about his world and immerse himself in the one Milton has created? With the exception of two characters—Adam and Eve—what obligates *any* of the other characters, not merely Sin and Death, to maintain "that

¹⁰ *PL*, Book II: 666-673.

¹¹ Knapp, p. 52.

¹² Joseph Addison, "The Spectator," Vol. 2, No. 273, p. 84.

¹³ "As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable," (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part XV).

Measure of Probability”)? Is it any more probable that either God or Satan, as beings with whom we interact, would exist in our world?¹⁴ If one can accept the world Milton paints for us during his twelve books—including the “real” existence of Sin and Death in that habitat—the next step is to determine Milton’s reason for including an allegory that personifies the human notions of sin and death.

When taken as a whole, *Paradise Lost* is, essentially, Milton’s map, which guides the reader in his exploration of the one event to which all mankind can relate and which all humans have in common: the Fall of Man. In so doing, Milton aims to help us identify with the event—and all the characters, implications, and consequences thereof—as closely as possible. In order to help his readers feel a connection with the characters and events of his epic, it is necessary for him to establish a link between reader and content; a bridge between worlds: that of his epic and that to which we humans are accustomed. With regard to character, Milton builds this bridge by likening the agents of his poem to humans.

Allegory is the tool Milton uses to relate complex ideas to the reader. His challenge is to introduce the concepts of sin and death into a world where they previously did not exist. Beginning with the theory of the blank slate—the notion that neither reader nor agents in his epic have any comprehension of what sin and death are—Milton attempts allegorically to describe the physical form and behavior, or personality, of each of the concepts personified.

When introducing these concepts into a world unaccustomed to such phenomena, it is necessary for Milton to personify them in a form that the inhabitants of his created world and his readers can comprehend. It is difficult for humans to grasp—let alone fully

¹⁴ The character of God and his human qualities will be discussed further in chapter four.

understand—agents that lack palpable form. So that his readers may better understand the role of Sin and Death, and the implications of their presence in the world, Milton gives shape and action to the agents. In personified form, Sin and Death are able to interact—a concept to which Addison objects¹⁵—with the other characters in the world of *Paradise Lost*. This interaction first occurs when Satan encounters them¹⁶ at the gates of Hell:

Before the Gates there sat
On either side a formidable shape;
The one seem'd Woman to the waist, and fair,
But ended foul in many a scaly fold
Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm'd
With mortal sting: about her middle round
A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bark'd.¹⁷

Through Satan, the reader is presented with the first instance of the “real existence” of Sin. What could be more “real” than a shape with physical form and character—one who possesses the gift of speech and action? Given this active participation in the epic, how, as Kames and others contend, does this allegory intrude on the realistic epic? If Sin is just as real as the other characters in the poem—and is able to interact with them—then her place in the epic is equally justified. Although the character Sin is the personified representation of the notion sin, she exists as a bodily agent in the poem, visible to both Satan and Death. Is not solid form the primary factor that determines whether something

¹⁵ Addison, Vol. 3, No. 357, p. 149: “It is plain that these [examples of allegory] I have mentioned, in which Persons of an imaginary Nature are introduced, are such short Allegories as are not designed to be taken in the literal Sense, but only to convey particular Circumstances to the Reader after an unusual and entertaining Manner. But when such Persons are introduced as Principal Actors, and engaged in a Series of Adventures, they take too much upon them, and are by no means proper for an Heroic Poem, which ought to appear credible in its principal Parts.”

¹⁶ This is the first time in Satan’s memory that he has encountered Sin; he does not remember “giving birth” to Sin, which would have been their first “encounter.”

¹⁷ *PL*, Book II: 648-654.

is “real” in our world? By virtue of her possessing a body, Sin as a character becomes a participant in the epic.

When introducing the idea of sin to someone who has no idea what it is—Adam and Eve before the Fall, for example—the best way to illustrate it, the route Milton takes, is to paint an image of what sin as a being in the world might *look* like. What we get is a creature whose upper half “seem’d Woman.” This phrase immediately makes us realize that Sin is a female being, but *not* human, for Milton uses the word “seem” and not “was” or “is.” The next detail Milton provides is that the character Sin possesses a lower body resembling “a Serpent.” We then learn that this being is “arm’d / With mortal sting,” so we know that she is capable of causing harm or death. So in this very first encounter with Sin, Milton has provided for the reader a description of Sin’s physical form, as well as a detail of one of her functions. Like any other character in the epic, Sin now exists as an active participant in Milton’s world.

Following his introducing Sin into the world of *Paradise Lost*, Milton proceeds to personify death:

The other shape,
If shape it might be call’d that shadow seem’d,
Or substance might be call’d that shadow seem’d,
For each seem’d either; black it stood as Night,
Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,
And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem’d his head
The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.¹⁸

Although Milton’s attempt at describing the indescribable—the palpable form of death personified—does not evoke an image as concrete as that of Sin, the fact that Death has a form implies his “real existence” in the context of the epic. We next learn from Milton

¹⁸ *PL*, Book II: 666-673.

that this shape possesses the ability to stand; the phrase “it stood” is a behavior possible for a being or object that maintains physical form. Add to these qualities Death’s “dreadful Dart”—no doubt a tangible thing—and the reader is left with a vague image, but image nonetheless, of death incarnate. And what being without physical shape is capable of wearing “the likeness of a Kingly Crown”? All these aspects of Milton’s description of Death suggest that he is, indeed, a physical being, however difficult to describe.

The notion of death—a concept that humans understand, but only to a limited extent, since no living being has ever experienced it and survived to tell the tale—is more difficult to present allegorically. Unlike the notion of sin, which exists and manifests itself in everyday life, death is a notion more difficult to grasp. As the end of life, and not something that an individual *does*, death therefore presents a greater challenge to the poet who would personify it. The stereotypical icon of death is a skeleton, but depicting it in such a way does not do the horrid nature of death justice. Death is something so unknown to us that it is difficult for any writer to imagine it in tangible form. Recognizing this challenge, Milton is therefore left with the most vague of descriptions. He prods—as though he were groping for something just out of reach—the words that describe what death might look like in physical form: “The other shape / If shape it might be call’d that shadow seem’d.” The first phrase sets up Death as a physical existence simply by calling the agent a “shape.” Milton then immediately qualifies his attempt to describe a being so vague by saying that it might not even be a shape, but rather something more closely resembling a “shadow”—an intangible “image cast by a body intercepting light,” according to one definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Rather than a body itself, Milton describes Death as the image created by another body. Although he does not give

Death as solid an existence as his other characters, Milton makes it clear that Death is *there*, for “black it stood as Night, / Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell.” Milton has crafted Death, along with Sin, as an agent in the poem, capable of interacting with and influencing other characters.

Once Sin and Death have been established as players in the world of the epic, they are susceptible to the same external influences to which every other character is subjected. That is, they are fully developed characters—complete with physical presence and behavioral traits—who are likely to change with the development of the plot. Like a piece of clay being molded by its creator, Milton has shaped Sin and Death as agents possessing mass, and subject to being shaped by outer influences; the agents are pliable. As man’s understanding and definition of sin changes, so does the character of Sin. By embodying the *concept* of sin in a character, Milton is able to alter the attributes and behaviors of Sin. For example, in Book X, after Adam and Eve have sinned against God, the character Sin—who existed prior to the Fall, but was not yet a reality in the lives of Adam or Eve—begins to feel herself gaining power: “Methinks I feel new strength within me rise, / Wings growing, and Dominion giv’n me large / Beyond this Deep.”¹⁹ Milton illustrates in the character Sin the fact that man has committed sin. The being grows physically, as well as feeling an intangible “new strength” that will allow her to leave the confines of Hell and exhibit her influence “Beyond this Deep,” on earth.

Milton has created the characters of Sin and Death in his epic so that they may interact with other agents as “real existences.” He has brilliantly shown his readers that

¹⁹ *PL*, Book X: 243-245. This passage echoes Book IX: 1009-1010, when Adam and Eve, after having sinned, “fancy that they feel / Divinity within them breeding wings.” Intriguing about these two passages is that Sin’s ascent to power is *real*, whereas that which Adam and Eve experience is illusory.

when Adam and Eve committed the Original Sin, something *did* happen: Sin and Death—and the ideas they represent—literally *did* come into the world.

Chapter II

Satanic Universe *The World of Allegory and the Role of Satan*

In exploring the presence of Sin and Death in Milton's epic, it is necessary to examine first the concept of allegory, then the relationship of these two characters to Satan. The former requires an historical analysis of the mode and the latter an exploration of the characters' development and behavior in the world of *Paradise Lost*. As we saw in the previous chapter, much of the eighteenth-century criticism of Milton's Sin and Death—why Johnson and others deem it inappropriate in the context of an otherwise realistic epic—hinges on the conception of *what* an allegory is. In his *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher discusses what an allegorical being in our world might be like:

If we were to meet an allegorical character in real life, we would say of him that he was obsessed with only one idea, or that he has an absolutely one-track mind, or that his life was patterned according to absolutely rigid habits from which he never allowed himself to vary. It would seem that he was driven by some hidden, private force; or, viewing him from another angle, it would appear that he did not control his own destiny, but appeared to be controlled by some foreign force, something outside the sphere of his own ego.²⁰

The allegorical character described here falls precisely in line with how a personified abstraction, such as Sin or Death, might behave. Both Sin and Death are so consumed “with only one idea” that it should be nearly impossible for them, according to early critics, to exhibit any characteristics beyond those that their embodiments represent. But to understand allegory fully, and determine whether it *can* go beyond what it appears to be on the surface, we must take a step back and look at *why* a writer employs allegory.

When an author constructs allegorical characters or situations, he is doing so in order to demonstrate clearly to his readers, through language, a specific thematic idea

whose meaning is otherwise difficult to understand. As far back as Plato,²¹ authors have used allegory to create in the reader's imagination a vision of an otherwise intangible notion or principle. As Fletcher puts it, "In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another. It destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words 'mean what we say.'"²² An author forming an allegory is using symbols and extended metaphor to create a world similar to our own, but one that represents or conveys something beyond the surface. He is telling a story that challenges the reader to forget the normal expectations of his own world and immerse himself in the realm the author has formed—for illustrative purposes. In Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, for example, Milton uses the war in Heaven to exemplify the ongoing battle between good and evil. We must keep in mind during this allegory, however, that the language Milton uses is for *our* benefit and more than likely does not convey what is actually occurring; the scene Milton constructs with his words represents something else.²³ As Fletcher explains, we must essentially abandon words as we know them, for they take on entirely new meaning in representing the world of the allegory. The language used to convey the actions of an allegorical character, if taken literally, defeats the allegory before it can begin. Typically, the method that molds an allegorical being is personification: the technique of ascribing human characteristics to a non-human entity.

With our world comes a certain set of laws and preconceptions of things. A rock is a rock (so far as our language defines it) and, if dropped from a building, it will fall to the earth. The same rock, if personified or rendered allegorically, loses all the attributes of this world: maybe it looks and behaves the same and maybe it doesn't. Regardless, the

²⁰ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, p. 40.

²¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, pp. 205-233.

reader must suspend his belief about what a rock *is* and what it *does* in this world. The language the author uses to describe a personified rock must therefore be accepted as truth, for our knowledge of an earthly rock applies only to a certain degree within the allegory. We use our preconception of a rock in conjunction with how the rock is personified, in order that we may first imagine the personified rock, then understand why the author has chosen to personify it. According to Maureen Quilligan, what we learn in one allegory we cannot, by virtue of what an allegory is, apply to another: “The act of sitting down to read an allegory as an allegory remains a chore, primarily because we cannot easily use our experiences with other allegories to guide our expectations of the present text.”²⁴ It is because each allegory creates its own universe—separate from the world of the reader and from other allegories—that we must delve anew into each one.

Similarly, if we are to immerse ourselves in an allegory that aims to personify an abstract notion, such as love, we must open-mindedly approach the author’s conception of the notion. Our comprehension of love is based on our experience of it in this world; it is defined by a particular set of ideas and associations that accompany it. In order to see love as personified by an author (as the notion exists in *his* mind), we must start with a blank slate. We must then study each attribute and behavior of the character to build in our minds the image of how the author envisions, or wants us to envision, the concept of love (as more than an abstract notion). “Whatever area the abstract ideas come from, these agents give a sort of life to intellectual conceptions; they may not actually create a personality before our eyes, but they do create a semblance of personality.”²⁵ What is the point of bestowing life on “intellectual conceptions”? Does the author not think his

²² Fletcher, p. 2.

²³ The war in Heaven, and this notion, will be discussed at length in chapter three.

readers are capable of understanding what love means? In making the love “come alive,” the author is creating a representative, concrete form of what the notion “looks like”—thereby establishing it as a real presence in the world he has created. He is also instilling the form with the ability to interact with other personified agents in the allegory.

Fletcher seems to agree with eighteenth-century critics who contend that these agents should serve only one purpose—representing ideas—and should not be characterized beyond that. “Even though they may not be given personality, these ideas are partially personified and can be said to operate within a dynamic system. They all modify each other in some way.”²⁶ What distinguishes an idea that has been personified from a character that has personality? If allegorical agents are able to interact with and influence one another, why should they be confined within the boundaries of the allegory? Why should they not be permitted to cross into the realm of the greater fiction in which they exist? If the author has succeeded in convincing the reader to enter into the world of the allegory, where the rules of the outside world do not apply, then is it not the author’s prerogative to expand or limit the role of the allegory in the context of the larger work?

After all, the convention of allegory has been shaped by the writers who employ it; the concept of allegory has come to imply that “A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying ‘by this I also (*allos*) mean that.’ If this seems to be done continuously, we may say, cautiously, that what he is writing ‘is’ an allegory.”²⁷ The act of creating allegory is set apart from metaphor in that the latter involves more of an isolated instance of applying meaning. A writer is creating metaphor if he were to say, for

²⁴ Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*, p. 16.

²⁵ Fletcher, p. 27.

example, “As he bit the fruit Adam could taste sin on his tongue.” Although this example demonstrates Frye’s conception of allegory—since he suggests that the act of eating the fruit *is* sin (“by this I also mean that”)—this would be a case of metaphor, assuming it were left at this. If it were developed and sustained, however—if the sin “created” by the act of eating the fruit were to “come to life” or become active, rather than remaining passive—this metaphor would become allegory.

The allegorized sin in this hypothetical metaphor might eventually begin to interact with other personified agents. In so doing, the personified agent would likely remain within the allegory, rather than being abandoned after it has served to illustrate its point: “The typical personified agent can ‘act’ only in consort with other similar agents, a combination which limits each work to a given problem or set of problems. The highly controlled interaction of ideas requires a corresponding definition of the limits of each.”²⁸ In allegory as Johnson and Addison conceived of it, the ideas would remain ideas, given limited personality and the ability to interact only with each other. In *Paradise Lost*, Sin and Death *do* represent ideas, but they cross the boundary between allegory and fiction. And why shouldn’t they? They exist as characters in a world Milton has created; it is the poet’s privilege to shape them as he chooses.

Milton breaks the allegorical standard: he crosses the line between allegory and fiction; his allegories do not remain within their confines. His Sin and Death interact with Satan, who is *not* merely a personified representation of idea, but a character. Although he may be the embodiment of the notion of evil, he is not evil, *per se*. Yet he is a part of Milton’s allegory. Milton takes it a step further: Satan spawned these personified notions.

²⁶ Fletcher, p. 29.

²⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 90.

This is the point at which Johnson and others find fault with the allegory. These critics are disturbed by this “intrusion” of a nonallegorical being (Satan) into the separate allegory of Sin and Death simply because it violates the traditional notion of allegory. True, Milton does disregard what allegory *should* be, but why does he choose to do so? And what is the advantage of establishing the incestuous relationship of this “evil trinity”?

Some critics argue that Milton’s transition back and forth between epic and allegory works in correlation with the thematic elements of the epic, namely the Fall:

Isabel MacCaffrey has noticed that after the Fall in Book IX, the poem “hovers on the threshold between literal and figurative, and it is impossible to accept the bridge from Hell quite as unreservedly ‘real’ as the cosmology of Book III.” Milton’s description of Sin’s and Death’s bridge-building “shows the process of finding concrete for abstract caught half-way”—and therefore halfway toward true allegory, just as Sin and Death are halfway to earth.²⁹

This passage discusses the moment at which Sin and Death transcend not only the boundaries of allegory—since they have previously come face to face with Satan³⁰—but those of the Earthly world, represented by Eden. Until this point, when allegory (Sin and Death) crosses the border (the bridge) that separates it from our human existence (Adam and Eve), it seemed out of our reach—difficult for us to comprehend or relate to. Because allegory is a figurative world distinct from our world, it is something only experienced in theory and in words: “All allegories are texts, that is, words printed and hand-painted on a page. They are texts first and last: webs of words woven in such a way as constantly to call attention to themselves as texts.”³¹ When Milton has Sin and Death cross the “literal

²⁸ Fletcher, p. 32.

²⁹ Quilligan, pp. 180-181.

³⁰ *PL*, Book II: 648-673.

³¹ Quilligan, p. 25.

and figurative” bridge between worlds—that of the reader and that of the allegory—the agents become a presence that, although difficult to visualize, cannot be denied. It is a challenge for any reader to believe what he cannot fully imagine. Fletcher compares the nature of allegory to seeing the world in an enhanced, drug-induced state:

A comparison between what allegorical painting actualizes and what allegorical literature leaves to the imagination to “see” will show that the visual clarity of allegorical imagery is not normal; it does not coincide with what we experience in daily life. It is much more like the hyperdefinite sight that a drug such as mescaline induces.³²

The nature of the meeting between Satan, Sin, and Death is a scene so difficult to imagine, that great effort—on the part of both writer and reader—is required if anyone hopes to conceive of it. Milton uses “hyperdefinite sight”—allegory—to assist him in his end of this difficult task.

How does Satan’s behavior as the personification of evil differ from that of Sin and Death? First, Satan does not represent a single idea, but a more complex body of associations. He begins as a character who thinks and acts, for he makes the decision to take a stand against God. Unlike either Sin or Death, who were formed from their respective notions—Sin sprang from Satan’s head (his mind) to represent the human concept of sin (an intellectual notion), and Death was formed by the sexual union of Sin and Satan (the embodiment of evil)—and will always exist as such, Milton gives Satan the flexibility to represent any number of ideas, thoughts, or actions. He is therefore set apart from Fletcher’s description of what an allegorical being might be like in “real life” (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), in that he is not “obsessed with only one idea.” He is initially a complex agent who, prior to the start of the epic, has already fallen from

³² Fletcher, p. 102.

Heaven. When we first encounter Satan, he is busily plotting his attack against God and His angels. He later forms a scheme to enter the Garden of Eden and tempt God's creation to defy Him. These are only a few of the variety of ways in which Satan is more complex than either Sin or Death.

Upon examining the development of Satan's character, we see a cyclical pattern. When God punishes Satan in Book X by turning him into a serpent, the allegory of Satan comes to an end.³³ The "journey" of Satan begins in Heaven (before the start of the epic), as an angel of God, then it ends where it began: Satan is back with God being punished for his crime against man. Is this not the nature of an allegory? Allegory exists within its own sphere, separate from the world and from other allegories. The traditional allegory, then, must necessarily end in the same place that it began. So in this sense, the plot involving Satan follows the pattern of allegory.

The character of Satan, however, is too complex to qualify as a traditional allegorical figure. His role is not merely to represent an idea or illustrate a point. Rather, his character is complexly interwoven with Sin and Death. Like the bridge that connects Sin and Death to Eden, the story of their relationship is both literal and figurative: Sin is born from Satan and Death is born from Sin, and prior to their entering Eden, Sin and Death exist only for Satan; he is the only nonallegorical character who experiences them. Because he can't remember his own progeny and doesn't believe Sin when she tells him the story of her birth and Death's, they are seen by some critics as a function of his

³³ *PL*, Book X: 175-181.

mind,³⁴ and do not exist for any other characters in the poem. This possibility, of course, is destroyed when Sin and Death enter Eden in person:

Meanwhile in Paradise the hellish pair
 Too soon arriv'd, *Sin* there in power before,
 Once actual, now in body, and to dwell
 Habitual habitant; behind her *Death*
 Close following pace for pace, not mounted yet
 On his pale Horse.³⁵

The first part of this passage suggests that the moment Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge, Sin was alive in Eden (“Once actual”). Now, having journeyed from Hell, Sin has entered Eden “in body,” thus making her presence—and thereby the concept of sin—more real to both the reader and the previously innocent couple. The phrase “habitual habitant” also looks to the future and implies that sin will exist forever in the world of man—or at least until the Son’s second coming, as foretold in Revelation.³⁶ Directly following Sin is her inseparable counterpart, Death. He, and all that he represents, is equally real and actually *there* in the Garden. Likewise, death will from this point forward be a reality for man.

Returning, however, to the initial meeting of Satan with Sin and Death, the possibility exists at that point that the allegorical beings are simply agents of Satan’s own internal allegory. They interact only with *him* at that point; both sin and death seem to be extensions of what Satan represents. This coupled with the fact that Satan doesn’t recognize his own progeny—even after Sin recounts the story of their conception to him—suggests that Satan may even be encountering them in dreamlike fashion, similar to the drug-induced “hyperdefinite sight” of allegory that Fletcher explains. Is Satan

³⁴ “...Milton tells the story of the creation and the war in heaven through the agency of an angel spokesman, and so also, the only personifications in *Paradise Lost*, Sin and Death, are the created agents of Satan,” (Quilligan, p. 179).

³⁵ *PL*, Book X: 585-590.

³⁶ *Holy Bible*, Rev. 20:14-15.

encountering his own allegory, which has literally sprung forth from his own mind? In the second book, this is certainly a possibility, since the allegory has not yet transcended the boundaries of the real world.

Why does Sin emerge from the head of Satan? By extension, the head is the mind; that Sin comes from Satan's *mind* immediately suggests that the *notion* of sin is an intellectual one (stemming from the mind of evil). This leads to the next conclusion: if an intellectual notion is to be personified, it could *only* be an allegory, created by the imagination of a writer. Milton's challenge, then, is to render the image of how the agent Sin would appear in form and how she would operate, both as allegory and daughter and lover of Satan. He responds to this challenge by creating a being who is half-woman and half-serpent in form, and who relates to Satan as a fellow conspirator against God and man.

Milton's main challenge in creating the agent Death is to paint a mental picture of him—to make the unclear visible but not concrete. After Death has violently ripped his way into the world following the sexual union of Satan and Sin,³⁷ Milton must present to his readers, and shape within the allegory, a character so unimaginable in physical form that he succeeds only by removing the quality of recognition, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge explains:

...we know that sundry painters have attempted pictures of the meeting between Satan and Death at the gates of Hell; and how was Death represented? Not as Milton has described him, but by the most defined thing that can be imagined—a skeleton, the dryest and hardest image that it is possible to discover...³⁸

³⁷ *PL*, Book II: 781-787.

³⁸ Cited in Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton*, pp. 200-201.

The Romantic poets considered Milton's creation of Death the ideal sublime image since it is a dark, shapeless form—given shape nonetheless. It rests on the cusp between reality and imagination. In this sense it is also the ultimate allegory. As we have seen, allegory insists and relies on its separation from reality and the set of principles that normally govern it. Allegory creates its own world with its own laws. Death is *not* a solid form like that of a skeleton, but something far more horrific, beyond description. Yet Death is often represented in paintings as a skeleton because that reduction of human life is the most horrible thing we can imagine. In the universe of Milton's allegory, however, Death is not “distinguishable in member, joint, or limb.”³⁹ The vagueness of Milton's Death is eerie.

And what of the incestuous connection among the three beings? Milton makes it clear more than once that Sin and Death are closely connected—to the point of inseparability. By making Sin the daughter and sexual partner of Satan, and Death the offspring of Sin and Satan, Milton is establishing a relationship that connects the three so closely that they must always be associated in the mind of the reader—and in the actual world of *Paradise Lost*. From Satan's first encounter with Sin and Death, the two exist, although separate physically, as one being: “Before the Gates there sat / On either side a formidable shape.”⁴⁰ Here Milton is applying double meaning to the second line of this description. It is grammatically acceptable to set apart two beings with the use of “either” and “a”—implying that there is *one* being on each side. Yet simultaneously, Milton is emphasizing the oneness of Sin and Death: They are both together and separate, with one of them on one side of the Gate and one on the other, but they sit in the singular as “a

³⁹ *PL*, Book II: 668.

⁴⁰ *PL*, Book II: 648-649.

formidable shape.” In Book X, as Sin and Death are literally and figuratively entering Eden, Milton spells out this closely-knit relationship for us: “Thou my Shade / Inseparable must with mee along: / For Death from Sin no power can separate.”⁴¹ Here Death is both the shadow (“Shade”) of Sin—a dark *reflection* of her—and her connected counterpart. This entrance into Eden by Sin and Death fulfills Milton’s prophesy that began the poem: “...whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the World, and all our woe, / With loss of *Eden*.”⁴²

What Milton has done in constructing the relationship between Satan, Sin, and Death is to create an evil trinity, of sorts, which mirrors and mocks that of God, the Son of God, and the Spirit of God (in Christian tradition, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). Through allegory, Milton has made this dark trinity a reality in the lives of both the reader and the agents of *Paradise Lost*, particularly Adam and Eve, who, at the epic’s close, are subject to experiencing both sin and death. They have also been literally forced out of Eden, where Sin and Death have moved in.

Milton’s allegory shatters the traditional method of the mode, but he is highly successful in using the genre to develop the content of his epic.

⁴¹ *PL*, Book X: 249-251.

⁴² *PL*, Book I: 2-4.

Chapter III

In Heaven as on Earth *Shaping Heavenly Landscape and War for the Reader's Benefit*

Allegory is a tool by which the writer conveys to the reader difficult subject matter in a clear or understandable fashion. As Angus Fletcher explains the concept in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, “In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another.”⁴³ In the case of *Paradise Lost*, Milton employs the mode not only when describing Sin and Death, but when detailing the war in Heaven and the interaction of celestial beings, as well as the connection between God and the Son.⁴⁴ Milton must use allegory because we are only capable of comprehending these events and relationships insofar as we can relate to them. Milton cannot write about what actually occurred before the creation of the world, but he offers a representation of it, constructed so that we can get an idea of how it *might* have happened. Fletcher says that “In most cases allegories proceed toward clarity, away from obscurity, even though they maintain a pose of enigma up to the very end.”⁴⁵ How is Milton able to know the workings of God and fathom the interaction of spiritual beings? Although blind to our world, he claims that God granted him the ability to see “things invisible to mortal sight,”⁴⁶ and so he serves as our translator in the realm of *Paradise Lost*. He is our guide on a journey that our own humanity has made us ill-equipped to take.

After narrating the battle between good and evil in Heaven, the angel Raphael explains that he has not presented it to Adam as it actually happened. Rather, he has used language and imagery that are accessible to Adam and Eve—otherwise the war “might have else to human Race been hid”:

⁴³ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ The character of God, as well as his relationship with the Son, will be discussed in full detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

⁴⁵ Fletcher, *Allegory*, p. 82.

⁴⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book III: 51-55.

Thus measuring things in Heav'n by things on Earth
 At thy request, and that thou mayst beware
 By what is past, to thee I have reveal'd
 What might have else to human Race been hid:
 The discord which befell, and War in Heav'n
 Among th' Angelic Powers, and the deep fall
 Of those too high aspiring, who rebell'd
 With *Satan*...⁴⁷

The “things in Heav'n” are both the characteristics of Heaven itself and the war that takes place there. Milton takes the true nature of these elements, known only to God and the divinely-inspired poet, and explains them in terms of “things on Earth” so that we may understand them. Even if he *could* explain the state of Heaven's being with words, it would be incomprehensible to the reader. So for our benefit, he allegorizes.

Similarly, God's deeds are beyond comprehension to the human characters within the poem, Adam and Eve, who parallel the reader outside the pages of the text. In the same way that Milton serves as our guide, the angel Raphael struggles with the challenge of offering the couple insight into the workings of God: “how shall I relate / To human sense th' invisible exploits / Of warring Spirits... / The secrets of another World...?”⁴⁸ The use of the word “invisible” echoes the earlier passage wherein Milton casts himself in the same role: of conveying what cannot be seen by man. Raphael makes a clear distinction between the human world and the spiritual world: He refers to the happenings of the latter as “secrets of another World,” and even wonders if it is “lawful”⁴⁹ or permissible to reveal them. The words Raphael uses to tell of God's “secrets” are allegorical by nature; they describe something hidden from the human intellect.

⁴⁷ *PL*, Book VI: 893-900.

⁴⁸ *PL*, Book V: 564-566 and 569.

⁴⁹ “[H]ow last unfold / The secrets of another world, perhaps / Not lawful to reveal” (*PL*, Book V: 568-570)?

The first challenge Milton faces in telling the reader of the war in Heaven is setting the stage for battle. Although Heaven may not possess earthly characteristics, the Heaven of Milton's allegory must, so that the reader can imagine it. One of our human limitations is that in order for us to believe an event took place, we require that it have a locale; if something happens, it has to happen *somewhere*. Thus, before Milton can describe the war, he must paint a mental picture of the battlefield in the mind of his readers.

Milton begins this process of setting the scene in Book III and utilizes the eyes of Satan as his instrument:

So wide the op'ning seem'd, where bounds were set
To darkness, such as bound the Ocean wave.
Satan from hence now on the lower stair
That scal'd by steps of Gold to Heaven Gate
Looks down with wonder at the sudden view
Of all this World at once.⁵⁰

The first way in which this passage contributes to setting the scene for battle is by establishing Heaven as a place; because Satan *goes* there, so can other characters. Heaven is likened to earth through such words as "stair," "steps," and "Gate," and thus can be imagined by the reader to exist. Next, this passage forms a relationship between Heaven and earth: the former exists above the latter, since Satan "Looks down with wonder" at earth. Because we think in terms of three dimensions, knowing *where* Heaven is in relation to us makes it more accessible.

After the war has begun, Satan and his troops gather and await the second day of fighting against God's angels. Satan pays close attention to the details of the landscape of Heaven: "Of this Ethereous mould whereon we stand, / This continent of spacious

Heav'n, adorn'd / With Plant, Fruit, Flow'r Ambrosial, Gems and Gold..."⁵¹ In the first line of this passage Satan observes that Heaven possesses a solid surface, so the home of God is likened to earth even more. Additionally, Satan and his angels stand upon the surface, just as we are able to stand on the earth. The remainder of the passage is used to describe some of the features of Heaven, all of which can be found in our world.

In addition to creating in Heaven an earthlike landscape, Milton places the angels of good and evil in the midst of a scene that closely resembles a seventeenth-century battlefield. Satan and his angels even use cannons in their attack against Heaven. Milton's challenge, however—using the voice of Raphael to convey the scene to Adam—is to explain the existence of an object (a cannon) he has never before seen, as well as a concept (war) that Adam has never before experienced.⁵² Using basic objects of comparison to which Adam can relate—like “Pillars,” “Wheels,” and “Wood”—Raphael describes the cannons employed by Satan and his angels:

Which to our eyes discover'd new and strange,
A triple-mounted row of Pillars laid
On Wheels (for like to Pillars most they seem'd
Or hollow'd bodies made of Oak or Fir
With Branches lopt, in Wood or Mountain fell'd).⁵³

Raphael admits that even he and the other good angels had never before seen anything like the cannons (“to our eyes discover'd new and strange”). He then likens the weapon (although he has not yet explained its function as a weapon capable of inflicting damage)

⁵⁰ *PL*, Book III: 538-543.

⁵¹ *PL*, Book VI: 473-475. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, line 473 contains the first known use of the word “Ethereous,” which means “Composed of, or of the nature of ether, or of the upper element of the universe.” Until Albert Einstein's theory of relativity disproved the existence of ether in the 1920s, scientists generally accepted that it was the medium responsible for carrying sunlight to earth.

⁵² This challenge closely parallels Milton's task of describing Death to the reader, as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁵³ *PL*, Book VI: 571-575.

to objects in Adam's own world: "Oak" and "Fir / With Branches lopt"—an image reminiscent of an earthly tree. The idea Raphael is trying to convey, of course, is that the cannon looks like a hollowed-out, horizontal tree, perched "On Wheels."

Raphael's next challenge is to relate to Adam how the weapons function; he describes how Satan and his angels utilize them: "From those deep-throated Engines belcht, whose roar / Embowell'd with outrageous noise the Air, / And all her entrails tore, disgorging foul / Thir devilish glut..."⁵⁴ This creates in the mind of the reader—and likely Adam as well—a vulgar image of a mammal expelling from its innards unneeded waste. Because Adam has never seen a cannon function, Raphael compares the action of a cannonball shooting forth from inside its container to a living beast "disgorging," or vomiting, something from inside. Use of the word "belcht" further associates the cannon to a human deed, as well as attaching a sound to it.

Further developing the connection between Heaven and earth, Milton touches on the element of time. Although God sees all time at once⁵⁵ and is not confined to the experience of the present and remembrance of the past as humans are, Heaven is subject to the same constraints of time as is earth: "...two days are past, / Two days, as we compute the days of Heav'n..."⁵⁶ Although he does not make it clear whether a day in Heaven is equivalent to a day on earth, Milton emphasizes the fact that two days have past (since the war in Heaven began) by repeating it—twice. However, it is possible that time does not *actually* exist in Heaven, but that Milton (through Raphael) must construct it—define distinct events—in order to complete his allegory of the war for Adam. Nevertheless, that there exists a measurement of time in Heaven further solidifies the

⁵⁴ *PL*, Book VI: 586-589.

⁵⁵ *PL*, Book III: 78.

connection between it and earth; Milton is continually providing us with details that help us to think of Heaven in human terms. Later, just before the war comes to an end, Milton emphasizes God's sending the Son on the third day to settle the battle between good and evil.⁵⁷ The poet simultaneously maintains the presence of time in Heaven, and alludes to the importance of the number three: the holy trinity of God, the Son, and the Spirit of God.⁵⁸ Yet only the Son, the figure to whom we can relate, plays a role in the war itself.

Before even introducing the characters participating in the war, Milton assigns to it certain features that allow us to understand the battle as though it were fought on earth. Again, the true nature of the war is known only to God and the divinely-inspired poet, but it is conveyed to us in such a way that we may relate to it. As Heaven prepares for battle at the beginning of Book III, trumpets sound and troops fall into formation⁵⁹—details derived from wars fought in our world. Milton does acknowledge, however, that the basic notion of angels going into battle against one another is unusual: "...though strange to us it seem'd / At first, that Angel should with Angel war..."⁶⁰ The idea works in opposition to our preconceived notion of angels as peaceful messengers of God.

Having established the characteristics of the war, we must next question why the war is being fought and why it is described in the manner that it is. The first answer that comes to mind is because Satan is attempting to overpower and defeat God, and that to do so requires bodily force. We must then recall that Milton has informed us that the war

⁵⁶ *PL*, Book VI: 684-685.

⁵⁷ *PL*, Book VI: 699 and 748.

⁵⁸ Also significant about the number three is the Biblical crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection three days later (1 Cor. 15:4). In addition, in Renaissance epic—such as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*—battles often occurred over three days. In Canto XI of Book I, Spenser tells us that "The knight with that old Dragon fights / Two days incessantly; / The third him overthrows, and gains / Most glorious victory," (p. 205).

⁵⁹ *PL*, Book VI: 56-68.

⁶⁰ *PL*, Book VI: 91-92.

was not really fought the way he describes it. He has done so for our benefit, because we can only understand war in terms of bodily affliction. How, then, was it fought? This question is difficult to answer because we cannot know the ways of spiritual beings. We do know, however, that Milton is describing a battle that can't be won—the contenders are immortal angels and neither side can kill the other, at least until the end of time.⁶¹ So how does he make such a battle interesting to his readers? Milton adds suspense to the battle by having Satan experience pain,⁶² but the character quickly heals from his wounds. By implementing gunpowder and the cannon into the war, Milton appeals to the seventeenth-century reader's conception of warfare. By doing so, however, is he trivializing this otherwise serious and unimaginable battle between good and evil? Milton no doubt assumes that his readers realize the battle cannot be won, so his intent is not to fool us into thinking that one side will prevail. Rather, he aims to convey the ongoing and intense struggle between good and evil in the universe, and he succeeds in doing so.

Furthermore, if killing the enemy is not the ultimate task of the war, then what is? Milton offers us several clues as to why the battle was waged. Although described in terms of an earthly battle for our benefit, the war in Heaven does not share the same goal: death of the enemy. In fact, when the Son finally steps in to end the war, he consciously chooses not to kill Satan, but to send him and his followers back to Hell:

One Spirit in them rul'd, and every eye
 Glar'd lightning, and shot forth pernicious fire
 Among th' accurst, that wither'd all thir strength,
 And of thir wonted vigor left them drain'd,
 Exhausted, spiritless, afflicted, fall'n.
 Yet half his strength he put not forth, but check'd

⁶¹ Milton surely casts the evil angels as immortal because in Rev. 20:2-3 and 9-10, it is prophesied that Satan will not be defeated until the world as we know it comes to an end, and the Kingdom of God reigns forever.

⁶² Satan and his angels experience “ghastly wounds” in Book VI, line 368, and have several instances of pain—in line 657 of the same book, for example.

His Thunder in mid Volley, for he meant
*Not to destroy, but root them out of Heav'n...*⁶³

The evil angels seem to be suffering less from physical abuse, and more from damage to something greater, such as the mind or soul.⁶⁴ The state of being “Exhausted, spiritless, afflicted,” though applicable to the body, more likely describes the more important defeat of evil and apostasy by goodness and faith. This likelihood is supported by the Son’s desire—his choosing to solidify his faithfulness to God—to keep the fallen alive, according to God’s plan, but to force them back to Hell, a harsher punishment than destruction.

Near the beginning of the war, Abdiel says that “...he who in debate of Truth hath won, / Should win in Arms...,”⁶⁵ implying that the battle waged for truth and merely represented by this clash of arms. Milton uses Abdiel here to reinforce the idea that the war as described exists as an allegory for the true battle taking place between good and evil: a “debate of Truth” about which force in the universe should prevail. Satan and his angels eventually lose and will ultimately be silenced in their challenge against good:

For strength from Truth divided and from Just,
 Illaudable, naught merits but dispraise
 And ignominy, yet to glory aspires
 Vain-glorious, and through infamy seeks fame:
 Therefore Eternal silence be thir doom.⁶⁶

In this passage the false sense of power that Satan and his angels experienced in battle is taken away from them (“For strength from Truth divided”). They are shamed for having dared to stand up against God. Their punishment is “Eternal silence”; the privilege of

⁶³ *PL*, Book VI: 848-855 (my italics).

⁶⁴ Are these notions of pain and injury the allegorical representation of damage to the intellect or purity or truth? Because God’s angels cannot be harmed, does this suggest that good cannot be defeated by evil?

⁶⁵ *PL*, Book VI: 122-123.

arguing the essence of truth (whether good or evil reigns in the universe) is stripped from them. To be denied the opportunity to debate truth is a greater punishment than death. In challenging God, Satan is ultimately defeated.

In addition to describing the features of the war itself, Milton helps us to understand the characters in the battle by ascribing human characteristics to them. In some instances, however, he does not even attempt to convey details, since the particular event is so unfathomable by the human mind. When the two opposing leaders in the war, Satan and Michael, come face to face in combat, it is an encounter so terrific that it is beyond words:

They ended parle, and both address'd for fight
 Unspeakable; for who, though with the tongue
 Of Angels, can relate, or to what things
 Liken on Earth conspicuous, that may lift
 Human imagination to such highth
 Of Godlike Power: for likest Gods they seem'd,
 Stood they or mov'd, in stature, motion, arms
 Fit to decide the Empire of great Heav'n.⁶⁷

This passage epitomizes Milton's task of describing in human language the events whose true nature is only relayed by "the tongue / Of Angels." He makes it clear that "Human imagination" cannot comprehend the workings of God. So in the war of Heaven and the characters who fight in it we encounter Milton's best attempt to relay the battle between good and evil—a notion beyond the limits of our human comprehension.

Milton explores the notions of sin and disobedience in the war, as well as Satan's pride, and the influence these factors have on the war's participants. He explains that the angels of God have the upper-hand in the battle because they are free of sin:

⁶⁶ *PL*, Book VI: 381-385.

⁶⁷ *PL*, Book VI: 296-303.

Invulnerable, impenetrably arm'd:
 Such high advantages thir innocence
 Gave them above thir foes, not to have sinn'd,
 Not to have disobey'd; in fight they stood
 Unwearied, unobnoxious to be pain'd
 By wound...⁶⁸

This passage suggests that the good angels, because they have not sinned or defied God, are “Invulnerable” against any attacks by the evil angels. They could not be “pain'd / By wound,” and will therefore stand unharmed as instruments of God. Clearly the good angels have the advantage in the war because they chose *not* to disobey God.

Inside the realm of the epic, God creates and rules over everything, so he therefore governs whatever happens within his world. Milton, as the creator of the story in which God reigns, is ultimately responsible for conveying to his readers the *ideas behind* the events of Heaven. Because no human can fathom the extent of things in God's kingdom, Milton chooses to construct an allegory in order that we may better understand the essential elements of what goes on in Heaven. We cannot understand the actual events themselves; we are incapable of doing so. As Samuel Coleridge explains in his *Miscellaneous Criticism*:

We may then safely define allegorical writing as the employment of one set of agents and images with actions and accompaniments correspondent, so as to convey, while in disguise, either moral qualities or conceptions of the mind that are not in themselves objects of the sense, or other images, agents, actions, fortunes, and circumstances so that the difference is everywhere presented to the eye or imagination, while the likeness is suggested to the mind; and this connectedly, so that the parts combine to form a consistent whole.⁶⁹

The world Milton has created in his epic—the words (“images with actions and accompaniments correspondent”) he uses to convey to us the “consistent whole” of

⁶⁸ *PL*, Book VI: 400-405.

⁶⁹ Samuel Coleridge, *Miscellaneous Criticism*, p. 30.

Paradise Lost—exists purely for the reader. In Book V, when Raphael tells Adam of the war in Heaven, he likens the spiritual (intangible) to the physical (tangible) for Adam’s benefit (and that of the reader), so that man may comprehend what occurred:

...yet for thy good
 This is dispens’t, and what surmounts the reach
 Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
 By lik’ning spiritual to corporeal forms,
 As may express them best, though what if Earth
 Be but the shadow of Heav’n, and things therein
 Each to other like more than on Earth is thought?⁷⁰

The implication here is that the way in which heavenly beings—God, Satan, and all their respective angels—interact with one another is beyond human comprehension and did not necessarily occur in the way Milton has described. The words Milton uses are purely for the benefit of the reader—for our understanding of the events. Does the same, then, ring true for the entire epic? Is *Paradise Lost* not Milton’s allegory? Does he tell it so that we can understand the fall of man and the events surrounding it, whether they occur as “spiritual” or “corporal forms”? Because we cannot relate to spiritual existence, Milton relates to us the Heavenly events in human terms.

⁷⁰ *PL*, Book V: 570-576.

Chapter IV

God and the Word *The Relationship of Father and Son, and Personified Action*

In discussing Milton's use of allegory and personification in *Paradise Lost*, the role of God as a character must be examined, as well as the relationship with his angels and his Son. Prior to the first "appearance" of God in his poem, Milton has established the deity's function in the world of the epic, as well as many of his traits, through both narrative commentary and Satan's dialogue with the other fallen angels. This characterization, coupled with God's actions in the poem, make him a paradoxical being—one with both human and divine features—whose simultaneous oneness with and separation from his Son mirrors that of Satan, Sin and Death. Furthermore, Milton constructs the voice of God as an extension of God himself; the word of God is personified as its own character: the Son.

Not until the beginning of Book III does God actively participate in the world of *Paradise Lost*. Until that point, the narrator refers to him on several occasions, and he is even mentioned by his greatest foe, Satan. So before the reader's first encounter with God as a character, Milton has already laid the groundwork for God's development and the role he will play in the architecture of the poem. The reader possesses beforehand an idea of what to expect.

Before the opening lines of the poem, Satan and his angels have fallen from Heaven and have vowed vengeance against Heaven for forcing them out. Satan loathes God and all that he stands for, but despite his wrath, the demonic angel is the first to acknowledge the extraordinary power of the creator of the universe. He addresses his troops in Hell as such: "O Myriads of immortal Spirits, O Powers / Matchless, but with

th' Almighty ..."⁷¹ In his salutation he labels his comrades as the most powerful beings in existence (at least in his mind), but is quick to insert the only exception to his claim: that no being is more powerful than the creator himself. From this the reader concludes that God must truly be a powerful being if his own enemy openly concedes that his strength is unmatched.

A book later, when Satan encounters his progeny at the Gates of Hell, the reader is presented with more evidence for the basis of God's extreme power and far-reaching influence across his universe. Having been commanded by God himself to watch over the gates, Sin and Death are ready to budge for no one. Sin proclaims that

The key of this infernal Pit by due,
And by command of Heav'n's all-powerful King
I keep, by him forbidden to unlock
These Adamantine Gates; against all force
Death ready stands to interpose his dart,
Fearless to be o'ermatcht by living might.⁷²

This passage suggests not only that Sin fully intends to respect and carry out the order of God, but that her cohort Death is ready to fight and destroy anyone who challenges his—and by extension, God's—authority. That creatures who sprung from Satan himself are willing to obey God again reinforces, well before his active engagement in the epic, the absolute power he exhibits over all the universe.⁷³

By the time we first encounter God we already have a firm notion that he is an all-powerful character of divine existence. We expect Milton to portray him as such and don't anticipate anything to the contrary, or even any indication that God might be less

⁷¹ *PL*, Book I: 622-623.

⁷² *PL*, Book II: 850-855.

⁷³ Sin decides several lines later (864-866) to submit to *her* creator, Satan, and opens the Gates of Hell for him. The quoted passage, nonetheless, illustrates the point.

than the almighty creator he seems to be. Yet as several passages demonstrate to us, Milton's God possesses both human and divine characteristics.

With an understanding of humanity comes a certain set of characteristics. A large part of what defines us as human is our potential to experience a wide range of emotions, such as pleasure. God explains that the reason he instills free will in all his creatures is twofold—to give them the opportunity to prove their love and commitment to their creator, and to give *him* reason to take *pleasure* in his creations:

Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
Where only what they needs must do, appear'd,
Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoil'd,
Made passive both, had serv'd necessity,
Not mee.⁷⁴

This passage conveys a characteristic of God, a supposedly divine being, that is certainly human: the enjoyment of freedom. Although God created man in his image, one does not expect an all-powerful being, responsible for the creation of the universe and everything in it, to take pleasure or pain in anything—especially since *he* is the one who orchestrates every event in his world. This expectation is set up by the characterization of God that occurs prior to Book III.

That God converses with his Son and his angels implies a human quality. Does a divine, all-knowing being have need of conversation, if he already knows all there is to know? Just as we crave social interaction with other humans, God seems to take pleasure

⁷⁴ *PL*, Book III: 102-111.

in conversing with other beings, as he does with Adam in Book VIII.⁷⁵ Milton shows us the portrait of a humanly God, but, as discussed in the previous chapter, we realize that he has likely done so purely for *our* benefit of understanding him better.

God explains that the capacity for mercy—the ability to forgive—is the most important quality one can possess.⁷⁶ If forgiveness is divine, then why does God himself exhibit vengeful behavior, similar to Satan in his desire to destroy God for expelling him? When God explains to his Son that man will follow Satan and betray his creator, he tells him that in order for man to be saved, some being (ultimately the Son of God) must give his own life for man: “Some other able, and as willing, pay / The rigid satisfaction, death for death.”⁷⁷ The word “satisfaction” suggests that in granting man atonement for his sin, God might even derive from his “revenge” against man a certain pleasure. This human behavior represents God in a paradoxical manner, which seems to compromise his divine nature.

In the opening line of Book III, Milton addresses God as “holy Light,”⁷⁸ thereby equating God with light itself. Two lines later Milton proclaims that “God is Light.” This characterization immediately sets God apart from any other being in the epic. Surely no human character is compared to a worldly illumination, for doing so would destroy his humanity, or at least his believability as a human character. Because God does not start out as a human character, Milton’s ascribing divine qualities to him falls perfectly in line with the reader’s expectations of what the character should be. Milton’s description of God is as a “Fountain of Light”—light so bright and blinding that God’s angels cannot

⁷⁵ *PL*, Book VIII: 398-411.

⁷⁶ *PL*, Book III: 134.

⁷⁷ *PL*, Book III: 210-212.

⁷⁸ *PL*, Book III: 1.

approach him without covering their eyes.⁷⁹ Is there a bodily form behind the blinding light? Or does Milton's God exist only as light? This passage offers the most detail of God's being, so based purely on the description Milton gives us, we can assume that God does *not* have physical form—yet another non-human characteristic.

Milton continues to describe God in ways that cast him as divine. As Alexander Pope said, "To err is human and to forgive is divine." What about passing judgment? Humans do so often, but are we always correct in our opinions? Of course not. So when the Son of God declares that God "judgest only right,"⁸⁰ his language implies that God cannot be *wrong* in his judgments. A being who can do no wrong is certainly not human.

The human capacity to exist in only three dimensions is an element central to our humanity. The fact that we experience life one moment at a time and *not* all at once is a defining characteristic of our limited existence in this world. We cannot live in the past or future whenever we wish (although our consciousness allows us to *remember* the past and *imagine* the future); in terms of our experiencing life, we're stuck in the present moment. This is not the case with the God Milton describes. God sees all time at once⁸¹ and has foreknowledge of all events in the universe, including Satan's plan to enter the Garden of Eden and tempt man to betray God. At this point in the epic, God speaks to his Son and tells him of the events forthcoming. That God must *tell* his Son of Satan's plot establishes a specific relationship between God and Son, and implies that the Son does *not* have the foreknowledge or the ability to see all time.

When God addresses the Son, he begins with the indicative "seest," which suggests that the Son does *not* have the ability to see the future without God's assistance;

⁷⁹ *PL*, Book III: 375-382.

⁸⁰ *PL*, Book III: 155.

God must tell the Son to look. This implies that the Son exists separately from the Father, and not as part of the same being. In *The Christian Doctrine*, Milton first acknowledges the possibility that Father and Son could exist as one: “If he is the Son, either he must have been originally in the Father, and have proceeded from him, or he must always have been as he is now, separate from the Father, self-existent and independent.”⁸² After some degree of reasoning, Milton concludes that the Son is “self-existent”: “Hence it follows that the Father and the Son differ in essence.”⁸³ Contrary to this conclusion, however, there exists other evidence in *Paradise Lost* that suggests Father and Son have a more intertwined relationship.

God himself is not a bodily agent, but a real presence in the poem nonetheless. As God’s conversation with the Son unfolds, and the Son begins to carry out the word of God, we see that the Son is the bodily agent who represents the wishes of God. When God commands something—whether it’s the creation of the New World⁸⁴ or that the War in Heaven be brought to an end⁸⁵—his intentions are effected by the Son, who is both the personified voice of God and God himself. Yet the Son exists as a separate character with unique traits.

The relationship between God and Son is first established when Milton declares that “The radiant image of his Glory sat, / His only Son...”⁸⁶ Use of the word “image” here is key to the connection between father and son. The Son is a reflection of God—both in that he represents his father in action, and that he exists as the bodily agent for the being composed purely of light.

⁸¹ *PL*, Book III: 78-79.

⁸² Milton, *The Christian Doctrine*, p. 956.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *PL*, Book III: 705-713.

⁸⁵ *PL*, Book VI: 702-703.

More than once⁸⁷ God bestows on the Son all his own qualities, both transferring the throne, so to speak, to the future king, and simultaneously effecting a transmutation of his own being unto the Son. When God describes the future—the point at which humanity will come to an end—he declares that “God shall be all in all,”⁸⁸ yet tells the Son that *he* (the Son) won’t require the “regal Sceptre” once man has been atoned for his sins and the new kingdom is built. Coupled together, these phrases suggest that God and the Son will *not* reign as one. God then uses a similar phrase in Book VI, lines 730-733, but this time replaces “God” with a direct reference to the Son: “*Thou shalt be All in All...*” (my italics). This use of language solidifies the simultaneous oneness and separateness of God and the Son.

Other examples of this connection abound. In Book V, line 728, God uses the phrase “what our power is.” Use of the plural “our” accompanied by the singular “is” suggests two separate beings who share one “power.” Following an inspirational speech by God to his angels, Milton tells us that “Towards either Throne”⁸⁹ all the angels of Heaven give their praise. This language echoes Satan’s discovery at the Gates of Hell, when he encounters Sin and Death sitting “On either side”⁹⁰ of the gates. This language structure, combined with the nature of the relationship between God and the Son, strikes an uncanny parallel between the holy pair and the Satanic trio. Just as Sin and Death possess a simultaneous oneness but exist independent from one another, so do God and the Son.

⁸⁶ *PL*, Book III: 62-63.

⁸⁷ *PL*, Book III: 168-172 and 305-333; Book V: 600-615.

⁸⁸ *PL*, Book III: 339-343.

⁸⁹ *PL*, Book III: 350.

⁹⁰ *PL*, Book II: 648-649.

Milton applies to God, however, a type of personification unlike that which he applies to Satan, Sin, and Death. He indirectly personifies God by using the Son as the agent of God's voice; it is the *voice* of God, not the *being*, that Milton personifies. The character of God is unique in that his voice, much like Milton's, dictates the course of events in the world of *Paradise Lost*. God's actions are carried out by the bodily character of the Son—so that we may imagine the workings of God in human terms:

So spake th' Almighty, and to what he spake,
His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect,
Immediate are the Acts of God, more swift
Than time or motion, but to human ears
Cannot without process of speech be told,
So told as earthly notion can receive.⁹¹

In this passage, Milton makes clear what he has shown through example in earlier books—that the Son instantly carries out the word of God. This concept is based on a Biblical notion that Milton surely drew from the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”⁹² God has no need to act on his intentions, for he simply speaks that which he intends to happen, and his desires are effected by the Son, his voice; his words *are* deeds.⁹³ Milton tells the reader in the above passage, however, that the words he uses to describe the events orchestrated by God and the Son—using the “voice” of his text—are for *our* benefit (“but to human ears / Cannot without process of speech be told”), in the same way that Raphael's description of the war in Heaven is for Adam's understanding.

⁹¹ *PL*, Book VII: 174-179.

⁹² *Holy Bible*, John 1:1-3.

⁹³ “Son, who art alone / My word, my wisdom, and effectual might, / All hast thou spok'n as my thoughts are...” (*PL*, Book III: 169-171).

In Book VII, when Milton describes how God creates the world, it is God's voice, represented by the Son of God, that carries out the deed of creating the material world. When God prepares to build the world, the Gates of Heaven open up for God's word (the Son) to journey through in order that he may "create new Worlds":

Heavn'n op'n'd wide
Her ever-during Gates, Harmonious sound
On golden Hinges moving, to let forth
The King of glory in his powerful *Word*
And Spirit coming to create new Worlds.⁹⁴

This passage clearly illustrates that the Son of God *is* the word of God personified, as he leaves Heaven to effect the "powerful Word."

In another instance of Milton's personification of the word, Adam and Eve actually encounter God and the Son in their oneness: "Came the mild Judge and Intercessor both / To sentence Man: the voice of God they heard / Now walking in the Garden..."⁹⁵ This passage is the climax of the meshing of God and the Son: God's voice and the Son are now one in the same and have entered the Garden of Eden.

Along with this moment are several other instances in which the Son and the angels of God carry out the actions of the creator's word. In Book V, for example, God sends Raphael to Eden to warn Adam and Eve about Satan.⁹⁶ While in the Garden, the angel explains to Adam the existence of God's creatures:

Our voluntary service he requires,
Not our necessitated, such with him
Finds no acceptance, nor can find, for how
Can hearts, not free, be tri'd whether they serve
Willing or no, who will but what they must

⁹⁴ *PL*, Book VII: 205-209 (my italics).

⁹⁵ *PL*, Book X: 96-98.

⁹⁶ *PL*, Book V: 225-229.

By Destiny, and can no other choose?⁹⁷

Although the root meaning of “require” is “to ask” (the word originates from the Latin *requaerere*), the modern reader more likely relies on a definition such as this one: “To demand of (one) to do something.”⁹⁸ This being the case, the reader surely questions the seeming paradox of God “requiring” the “voluntary service” of his creatures. If service is something that God “requires,” how can it simultaneously be up to each of God’s creatures to decide for himself whether to serve God?⁹⁹ Regardless, God’s angels and his Son carry out the Word, whether by choice or not. In Book XI, after man has fallen, God commands Raphael to go to Eden and insist that Adam and Eve leave the Garden forever.¹⁰⁰ Raphael does so, thus enacting the word of God.

⁹⁷ *PL*, Book V: 526-534.

⁹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*

⁹⁹ Recall the passage quoted near the beginning of this chapter, *PL*, Book III: 102-111.

¹⁰⁰ *PL*, Book XI: 96-98.

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