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"Evil" in the Bible and Milton

From "Unimaginable" to "Speakable"

Paradise Lost is an epic poem about the origin of evil. It retells the Biblical and apocryphal stories, principally the myth of Adam and Eve, but turns them into a kind of classical epic on the model of Homer and Vergil. It is quite other than Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which re-writes or challenges a part of the Qu'ran and the story of how it came to be written. The differences are obvious and radical, but there are interesting connections to be made, and Rushdie himself referred to Milton when discussing his choice of epigraph for the novel, which comes from Daniel Defoe's *Political History of the Devil*. Defoe, Rushdie claimed, was "being rude to Milton",[1] and the implication (what he strenuously denied once the Khomeini fatwa hit), was that Rushdie was being rude, as satire must be, to Islam. Rushdie was writing against the idea of an immaculate or sacred, unchangeable text from the point of view of a secular, speculative and open idea of what fiction might do.

Milton, on the other hand, apparently believed the veracity of the biblical stories he retold – though his friend Andrew Marvell at first doubted whether he would "ruin ... the sacred truths", and Shelley for one could wonder privately whether Milton was really still a Christian at the time he wrote *Paradise Lost*.[2] And it is true that, within its mythic narrative, the poem tucks a good deal of philosophical speculation. In so

1 *Writers in Conversation: Salman Rushdie*, Video Cassette, 1989, speaking with W. L. Webb as part of the "ICA Guardian Conversations" the day after publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

2 Marvell's poem, "On *Paradise Lost*", was published with the second edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674). Shelley's thoughts are in 'On the Devil and Devils', reprinted in Joseph Wittreich, ed. *The Romantics on Milton*, Cleveland, Case Western Reserve Press, 1970, p.535.

far as it is a narrative, the question of evil is explored through the characters whose story is being told, that of Adam and Eve, and especially Satan. In so far as it is speculation, it does what you would expect a great poem to do: it makes the words themselves the way to explore the question – evil, sin, hate. In both respects it pushes against the limits of received or sacred notions about evil, to the extent that, as most readers notice, Milton writes what is in many ways as open-ended a text as Rushdie, and seems to show a certain sympathy for the devil. This might be no problem for Mick Jagger, but it is a challenge for a poet who claims "to justifie the ways of God to Man",[3] and who professes to be retelling the Christian story.

This sympathy has been variously explained. One proposal is political. Milton was a radical, one of the leading figures of the English revolution, and indeed the first move in the story, chronologically speaking, is the rebellion of Satan and his angels in heaven, an event which Milton tells largely from the point of view of the rebels. An early reader, who did not share Milton's politics, the country minister John Beale, complained that "Milton is a poet too full of the Devill". Though he thought *Paradise Lost* "excellent", he found "great faults" in it, and preferred the earlier poetry, less obviously political: he wrote that Milton had "put such long & horrible Blasphemyes in the Mouth of Satan, as no man that feares God can endure to Read it, or without a poysonous Impression".[4] A more widespread suggestion, that of C. S. Lewis for example, has been to point out that evil is easier than good to

3 *Paradise Lost* I 26. The edition used here is that of Roy Flannagan, ed. *The Riverside Milton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998): subsequent references will be included in the text. The editions of Alastair Fowler, London, Longman, 1971, [2nd ed. 1997] and John Leonard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) are also referred to.

4 Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Laureate, Republican, Calvinist: an Early Response to *Paradise Lost* (1667)", *Milton Studies* XXIX, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993, pp. 181-98.

make interesting,[5] although why that should be so is not usually explored very thoroughly. Perhaps the most popular approach has been to imply that Milton's personality was split: the best known version has been that of William Blake, who claimed that "the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devils party without knowing it."[6] This is the most succinct formulation of a basic Romantic hypothesis, that there is something daemonic about the imagination. (It was extended by Wallace Stevens, when he wrote in "Esthétique du Mal" that "The death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination", and then further in that seminal song by the Rolling Stones, "Sympathy for the Devil".) There has also been an influential American effort by Stanley Fish to transfer that split to the reader, to argue that Milton deliberately entraps the reader into feeling sympathy for evil, and then makes us see the error of our ways and discover our own sinfulness: a kind of "Gotcha!" strategy.

My own view is that, whether or not Milton was himself divided on the subject, the poem offers conflicting discourses or ideologies: in one of them evil is a given, a pre-existent metaphysical principle, in another evil is a construct, a shifting concept invented or reconceived at each occasion. If God is good, as Satan puts it at one point, then I will be evil (*Paradise Lost* I 162-5). But the equation of those concepts, good and God, Satan and evil, is not a permanent fixity but a function of events and choices. God is not necessarily good, nor Satan evil. Both ideologies can be seen in Satan's famous paradoxical cry "Evil, be thou my good!" (IV 110). Evil is there both a pre-existent entity that Satan seems to feel he can address, and a choice he makes in the present time. The narrative level requires one discourse, but you can see the speculation suggesting the other. In either case, we need to

5 C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942, p.97.

6 David V. Erdman, ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, p. 35.

pay especial attention to the language of evil in the poem. At bottom, perhaps, what we discover in exploring evil, at least in this theologically oriented poem, is not so much that evil is "a problem", as that it is an effect of attributing goodness to God. "No Devil, no God", as John Wesley put it.[7] Evil and good seem to require each other. (Even an "evil empire" implies another one that is good – and for George W. Bush there is clearly no question which that would be.)

1

The traditional problem of the origin of evil is posed acutely in the following central passage. Adam and Eve listen to the angel Raphael's story of rebellion and war in heaven, the events which launched time and history as we know them. Having heard the story, Adam and Eve are filled

> With admiration and deep Muse to heare
> Of things so high and strange, things to thir thought
> So unimaginable as hate in Heav'n,
> And Warr so near the seat of God in bliss. (VII 52-55)

That luminous phrase "hate in Heaven" contrasts two words which the alliteration nonetheless requires us to breathe together, like other apparent opposites: devils/deities, hell/heaven, free to fall, Son/Satan.[8] The poem explores these words and makes them rub against each other in resourceful and fertile ways. And here, at the beginning of cosmic history, one all-encompassing evil, war, is said to be *unimaginable* to the first audience of the story.

Adam's reaction (with his consorted Eve) is not horror, however, but "admiration and deep Muse". They are innocent creatures, and have listened, like children, to a fearful story

7 Quoted in Rudwin, Maximilian. *The Devil in Legend and Literature,* Chicago, Open Court, 1931 [1973], p.106.

8 This point is explored more fully in Neil Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003.

with a happy ending. There may well be some irony in the narrator's description of the next stage of their reaction. They have heard, he says, about war near the peace of God, but

> the evil soon
> Driv'n back redounded as a flood on those
> From whom it sprung, impossible to mix
> With Blessedness. Whence Adam soon repeal'd
> The doubts that in his heart arose: and now
> Led on, yet sinless, with desire to know
> What neerer might concern him, how this World
> Of Heav'n and Earth conspicious first began. (VII 56-63)

The dramatic irony is clear: nothing concerns Adam more nearly than the story he has just heard of the origin and present existence of Satan. Yet Adam quickly puts aside his doubts because of the (apparently) happy ending of the war. He immediately asks the angel to switch from a narrative based on classical epic with all its blood and terror (Book VI), to a narrative that will reproduce the first chapter of the Book of Genesis (Book VII). The reaction shows that he has not understood the point of the war narrative, which was to show him that the same enemy is now threatening him. And this in spite of Raphael's explicit warning that Adam is to "beware / Of what is past"; therefore he has told the story of

> ... Satan, he who envies now thy state,
> Who now is plotting how he may seduce
> Thee also from obedience ...
> ... Remember and fear to transgress. (VI 894-12)

Adam does not shift from the mode of wonderment at hate in heaven to the mode of fear at hate on earth. Raphael has failed of the purpose given him by God, to get across a warning of the true situation, and Milton thus raises the question whether his own audience will do any better. He hopes, he says, that he will "fit audience find, though few" (VII 31) – and this just some thirty lines before he represents the inadequate reaction of Adam, Raphael's audience, to his own version of classical epic.

2

In this mini-epic within the epic, Milton gives the first move in the narrative sequence to God. The angels are called together to hear God's solemn decree anointing the Son as Lord – yet this decree is presented as deliberately arbitrary, and as if God knows there is likely to be trouble: he says that he has "begotten" his son in time, in fact this very day, and commands all to worship him: the tone of this announcement, especially if one reads it aloud with appropriate emphasis, makes it sound as if Satan has a legitimate complaint. The key word here is "disobeyes", which reminds the reader powerfully of that heavy word in the opening line of the poem: "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit ..."

> 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. (V 600-615)

All that before anyone has a chance to respond – but I suppose we can say that Satan has been warned. Understandably his reaction to this speech is that he "thought himself impaird" (665), a revealing and important pun: etymologically it means simply "made worse," from Latin *peior*, but the play with "pair" suggests what Satan complains of, that he is no longer on a par with the Son, had perhaps imagined himself a Son

too.[9] Indeed in some forms of the story, where we can see the influence of the Cain and Abel or Esau and Jacob pairs, Son and Satan are brothers.[10]

God's speech is very succinct. Indeed it packs into one line round a powerful caesura the whole duality of history, and even contradicts itself: "For ever happie: him who disobeys" (611). The problem is there: at the very moment the Son is said to be begotten in order to make everyone happy forever, God's word also calls Satan into being, not as Lucifer, his earlier name, but as the rebel, the disobedient one. Poor Satan, on this view, may seem to do nothing but respond to God's call, to walk into the trap opened for him here. He steps up to fill the conspicuously absent seat at the left (or sinister) hand of God. Like action and reaction God's word creates or begets both Son and Satan at the same moment, as "two twins cleaving together, leaping forth into the world".[11] Obviously, then, the language as well as the tone of God's speech is acutely troubling. Eternal happiness includes or provokes disobedience, the aspirating alliteration of "Holy Hill / Him Have" is quickly reduced to the single "Head", from which "Heaven" is too far to resonate, and the profoundly resonant word "anoint" (Christ, Messiah) is instantly reduced by the rhyme with the merely political "appoint".

In spite of the later pronouncements by Michael during the war that Satan himself is the "author of evil, unknown till thy revolt" (VI 262), a careful reading of the above passage sug-

9 Milton is careful not to specify Satan's rank, but at VI 690 he and Michael are described as "Equal in their Creation". For more on the pun, see R.A. Shoaf, *Milton, Poet of Duality,* Gainsville, University of Florida Press, 1993, p. 16.

10 E.g. Lactantius 2.8.7; J. B. Russell, *Satan: the Early Christian Tradition,* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981, pp. 149-59, for the Bogomils', an elaborate version of the brothers narrative, see Russell, *Lucifer: the Devil in the Middle Ages,* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, pp. 43-49, 185-90.

11 *Areopagitica,* p. 13, in Don M. Wolfe, et al. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton,* 8 vols., New Haven, Yale University Press, 1953-82, vol. 2.517 (hereinafter YP).

gests that God's creative word has called him into being at the same moment as he announces the elevation of the Son. God's speech is performative: "In the beginning was the Word". Strictly speaking, perhaps, Satan and his cohorts are "self-tempted, self-deprav'd" (III 130), in the sense that they a-re free not to react in this way, yet we would have to imagine a defective speech of God if what it here predicts were not performed.[12]

3

God's language is too powerful: it is a magical language of the kind that is conveniently registered by the two meanings of the English word *spell.* Elsewhere Milton gives us another instance of this explicitly performative language of God, and once again it is the origin of something evil. Milton's Hell, if not its chief inhabitant, is a Vergilian place (with some Dantesque additions). But where does this Hell come from? That is not a question Vergil asks, or needs to, but Milton does, and answers it. In doing so he faces the key theological question of whether the Christian God creates evil: in Milton he does, but in a subordinate clause. The passage follows the council scene in Book II, when the more adventurous devils take off to explore Hell, their new habitation, and do not much like what they see:

12 Theologians and Miltonists, even Milton's God, spend some energy denying that his prediction actually causes something to happen: "they themselves/ Decreed thir own revolt, not I; if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on thir fault" (*Paradise Lost* III 116-8). For the theology see Georgia Christopher, *Milton and the Science of the Saints,* Princeton UP, 1982, pp. 92-115, but see also William Empson, *Milton's God*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1961. [rev. ed. 1965], pp. 81-89, 95-97. Dennis Burden, *The Logical Epic*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 21-2, quotes a baffled Hume: "To reconcile the indifference and contingency of human action with prescience, or to defend absolute decrees, and yet free the Deity from being the author of sin, has been found hitherto to exceed all the powers of philosophy" (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* sect VIII, part II).

through many a dark and drearie Vaile
They passed, and many a Region dolorous,
O'er many a Frozen, many a Fiery Alpe,
Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death,
A universe of death, which God by curse
Created evil, for evil only good,
Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds,
Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,
Abominable, inutterable, and worse
Than Fables yet have feigned, or fear conceived,
Gorgons and *Hydras*, and *Chimaeras* dire. (II 618-29).

The passage contains one of those memorably monosyllabic lines, accumulating stresses, which make the reading of Hell analogous to exploring it (compare 948 and 950, where "Ore bog or steep, through strait, rough, dense, or rare", it is the voyaging Satan who "pursues his way,/ And swims or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flyes"). But the key line about "evil", in which the word is repeated, and which seems a bit short, visually at least, is actually too long by one syllable and requires an elision across the repetition in "for evil". These metrical marvels call strong attention to the reading of this vital passage, and slow it down.

The passage is suitably dotted with unpleasant bits of the natural world, and also with classical monsters, Gorgons, Hydras, and Chimaeras, who threatened Aeneas during his underworld journey (*Aeneid* VI 288-9). But the most important allusion is not to Vergil but to the biblical text that comes closest to attributing evil to God, Isaiah 45.7: "I form light and I create darkness; I produce good and I create evil."[13] Now Christians have generally wanted to avoid the conclusion that their god is responsible for evil. In his theological treatise, *De doctrina Christiana*, Milton explains this unsettling Isaiah text as follows: "that is, what afterwards became and is now evil;

[13] The word usually translated *evil* in the Hebrew bible, as here, is *ra;* the primary meaning is worthlessness or uselessness, hence bad or ugly. As a metaphysical entity there is not much about *evil* in Judaism, except for a brief flurry in the intertestamental or Second Temple period. There is still no entry for *evil* in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

for whatever God created was originally good, as he himself testifies, *Gen. i.* God always produces something good and just out of evil or injustice and creates, as it were, light out of darkness." So the stark statement of the biblical text is avoided by introducing a narrative time scheme – "afterwards".[14] This is indeed the orthodox Christian narrative, as developed by Origen and Augustine, for whom one day could make all the difference. And this passage from Milton's treatise shows how useful that invented narrative could be. Of course, the narrative is not there at all in Isaiah, and there is absolutely no justification for summoning it up.

The solution in the poem is to sail even closer to the wind, to repeat the biblical words but with the important grammatical modification that *evil* becomes an adjective in the phrase "created evil," and only then an abstract noun in the extension through apposition, "for evil only good." The first use of the word is a predicative adjective agreeing with the pronoun "which", and so referring to "a universe of death." No question, then, but that God himself creates this dreadful place, and by curse at that. The relation of good to evil certainly gets very muddy, both linguistically and theologically. We may well have to read twice to see that these syntactic niceties do not actually make God directly responsible for evil, at least as a nominal and philosophical abstraction. But he clearly makes something that is itself unequivocally evil. Plato, we may recall, had condemned Homer and the tragic poets in the *Republic* II 379-82, and argued (in the mouth of Socrates) that the gods were good

14 *De doctrina Christiana,* YP 6. 330, ch 8. Milton cites the text in the Latin of the Tremellius-Junius Bible: 'facientem pacem et creantem malum' (the Latin is cited in the Columbia edition, ed. Frank A. Patterson, vol. xv, p. 66). It is worth noting that in spite of Milton's love of accumulating Biblical quotations to support his views, he finds few texts to endorse his special and important doctrine about good coming out of evil: apart from the crucifixion itself, they are the Joseph story about converting Egypt from an agrarian to a mercantile economy, the cruelty suffered by martyrs in Acts 4.28 and Rom. 11.11, and Paul's words about tolerating heresies, 1 Cor. 11.19

and thus could not be responsible for evil.[15] Milton appears implicitly to be taking the side of the narrative poets in that quarrel with philosophy, and thus increasing the moral ambivalence of his God. The poem casts doubt on what people say and believe, on those narratives which count as authority to the communal mind, and which record the collective experience and wisdom, even the laws, of the peoples to whom we belong and owe allegiance. Milton is not Salman Rushdie, but he has a similar knack for summoning awkward bits of the sacred text for re-evaluation.

4

A key moment in Milton's retelling of the Genesis story comes when Satan teaches Eve to read the Bible – or rather to re-evaluate God's word, the prohibition. She thinks through the sacred text, and makes it mean something different from what it had originally seemed to mean. In Genesis God says (2. 17 in the Authorized or "King James" Version): "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die". Com-

[15] Plato's various discussions of evil (or evils) are at *Gorgias* 477e, *Theaetetus* 176a, *Politikos* 269c-d, 273b-c, *Lysias* 221 a-c, *Cratylus* 403e-f, *Timaeus* 42d, 48a, 53b, 86b-c, *Laws* X, 903b-905d. His general solution is that either evils are not the work of god, or they are not really evils but deserve punishments. We call things evil, runs the argument in *Laws* X, out of ignorance. The fullest discussion is Friederich Billicsich, *Das Problem des Übels in der Philosophie des Abendlandes, I. Von Platon bis Thomas von Aquino*, 2nd enlarged ed., Wien, Sexl, 1955, who argues that Plato, abandoning the Socratic insistence on ignorance, came close to a metaphysics of evil in matter (*Polit.* 273ff.), then in the passage at *Laws* X 896a ff. he even implies the idea of an evil world-soul. But the notion that the late Plato espoused a metaphysical evil entity such as the World-Soul is refuted in Fritz-Peter Hager, *Gott und das Böse im antiken Platonismus*, Elementa 46, Amsterdam, Rodopi, und Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 1987. I am grateful to Wolfgang Haase for this and other references. For further discussion, see Neil Forsyth, '*Paradise Lost* and the Origin of Evil' in *International Journal for the Classical Tradition*, vol. 6, no. 4, Spring 2000, pp. 516-548.

mentators had long had difficulty with this text, especially with the word "day", since clearly in the Genesis narrative, neither Adam nor Eve dies on the day they eat. And Milton was alert to the chiming word-play available in his London dialect between "day" and "die": indeed the theological problem is resolved by a word-game, when Adam, having heard the sentence imposed on them and their descendants, refers to "a long days dying" (X 964). But Eve's recasting of God's words is more subtle. There is, first of all, a minor variation when she quotes the prohibition back to Satan. As in Gen 3.3, Eve refers (IX 651) to a prohibition against even touching the fruit, though the prohibition itself was only against eating. Some misogynist Biblical commentators thought that in Genesis 3.3 she was unwarrantably adding to God's precept, but Milton is not using the two versions of the prohibition to undermine Eve: at IX 925 Adam too speaks of the "ban to touch" (when it is too late), and so does the epic voice at VII 46 ("Charged not to touch the interdicted Tree") – at the very moment he is drawing the moral about the story of the war in heaven, that Adam seems not to understand. Rather Milton is putting the focus on the intensity of Eve's thinking. In saying she must not even touch the tree, Eve is reinforcing her determination, but she is also admitting the attraction.

By the time she falls, however, God's word has lost its authority completely. She has been talked into believing that the words cannot possibly mean what they say: how could God be so cruel? No, rather he will praise your "dauntless virtue" (a word which contains etymologically the Latin for "man"). "Death" does not mean death, but rather putting off the old life to put on a new, just as I have in becoming a talking snake. And besides, knowledge is good. Eve is persuaded, perhaps most of all, by Satan's last term of address, "Goddess humane".

Christianity is the religion of the word, and yet Satan has put distance between the key terms, the relationship of God to word. In so doing, he has undermined the word itself. And subsequently "grievous Wolves" (the lying priests of Acts 20.29) have distorted "those written Records pure" (XII 508-13). The word may be God's, but it is not always to be trusted. Milton, in his role as the narrator, fears that, without

the constant and sustaining presence of the Heavenly Muse, he may fall (a vital word throughout the poem) from his flying steed, "Erroneous ... to wander and forlorn" (VII 19-20).

If we glance at what Milton wrote about the Bible in his treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, we can see why. For this radical Protestant, who claims allegiance only to the Bible and its word as sacred, even that bedrock of the word is fallible, and may in the act of being written down, have gone wrong. "Apparently not all the instructions which the apostles gave the churches were written down, or if they were written down they have not survived" (586), he allows, and then goes even further, to argue that scripture, "particularly the New Testament, has often been liable to corruption and is, in fact, corrupt. This has come about because it has been committed to the care of various untrustworthy authorities, has been collected together from an assortment of divergent manuscripts, and has survived in a medley of transcripts and editions [396]" (587-8). Recognizing this, Milton was driven, like many other Protestants, to argue for "a double scripture", to distinguish the external scripture of the written word from the internal scripture of the Holy Spirit engraved upon the hearts of believers (587). This separation will produce in the reader of scripture both great confidence, and gnawing anxiety, probably in equal measures. It accounts for the poet's complex relationship to the Muse, allows for Eve's re-reading, and misreading, of scripture, and establishes the gap between meaning and significance[16] that Satan fills, or exploits.

And if this sounds like the issues raised during the Rushdie affair, that is partly because the Christianity Milton knew had been through the Reformation, a similar crisis of the meaning

16 For these terms see E.D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Textuality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976, pp. 1-13, 79-81; for a critique, Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 256-80.

of the sacred word.[17] It caused major rifts within and beyond the church in something like the way that the affair of *The Satanic Verses* has made all of us acutely aware of what is at stake "in good faith". Christianity has no single equivalent of those deceptively straightforward verses that Islam finally rejected from the Qu'ran, but which if taken seriously, as Rushdie does, would call into question the whole of the doctrine of divine inspiration.[18] No single equivalent, yet the whole of the Reformation, in the writings of Erasmus or Luther especially, is a record of a similar process of doubt, sometimes cool, sometimes anguished. Maurice Kelley calmly points out that, whereas earlier Reformed theologians took the more sensible view that some of the canonical writings had been lost, Milton's contemporaries believed in the integral perfection of the Bible: the assembly as well as the dictation of scripture was the work of God. Milton himself, however, held to the older view, well aware of the textual irregularities and corruptions uncovered by Erasmus or Beza and ready to exploit them in his case against the orthodox view of the Trinity.[19] He was also ready to offer his own Latin versions of the Biblical proof-texts he used, as when he demonstrated that the name *god* can be given to angels in scripture, and cited Psalm 8.5, *minorem diis,* less than gods, even though the AV reads "lower than the angels".[20] Rewriting the Qu'ran as a novel, which is one of the motivations for Rushdie's marvellous book, is blasphemy (though not in English law). However much Rushdie may understandably have tried to retreat from that position in subsequent writings in an effort to cool everyone down, it is, within the terms of Islam,

17 Richard Waswo, *Language and Meaning in the Renaissance*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp.213-83.

18 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses,* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988, pp. 110-24, 363-70, and "In Good Faith" in *Imaginary Homelands,* London, Granta Books, 1991, pp. 393-414. The Star sutra is the one in question, Qu'ran 53: 19-21. See Martine Hennard-Dutheil, *Origin and Originality in Rushdie's Fiction,* Bern, Peter Lang, 1999, pp. 157-212.

19 Maurice Kelley, ed. *De doctrina Christiana,* in YP 6. 44-45.

20 John Carey, "Translator's Preface", YP 6. xiv-xv.

blasphemy. It was not necessarily blasphemous for a Milton to rewrite scripture as epic, as he does in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained,* but there are times when he knows he risks it: he asks anxiously of the Holy Light he apostrophizes in the first lines of Book III: "May I approach thee unblam'd?"

5

The example of Milton's games with the word *evil* in Hell is actually a key to the way he transforms the traditional *topos.* As usual we can get at the characteristic Miltonic view through his play with language, since for him, "language itself is the maze in which we wander."[21] God's creating word fashioned the universe, but it did so by dividing it from him and within itself.[22] And human languages, after Babel and the confusion of tongues, are "a jangling noise of words unknown," "a hideous gabble," "a hubbub strange" (XII 53-62). This *confusion* (the etymology of *Babel* according to both the Geneva and the Authorized version at Gen 11.9) is never explicitly dispelled or corrected, either in the Bible or in Milton, with the result that our languages, as Augustine understood, are at best shadowy riddling guides to truth.

What Eve really likes about the serpent, after all, is that he is a talking snake. As she says when he starts to speak to her before he leads her to the tree:

> What may this mean? Language of men pronounct
> By Tongue of Brute, and human sense expressed?
> [...]
> Thee, serpent, subtlest beast of all the field
> I knew, but not with human voice endued;
> Redouble then this miracle and say,
> How camst thou speakable of mute? (IX 553-63)

21 Stevie Davies, *Milton,* London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 102.

22 *Paradise Lost* VII 241, 251, 262, 269. See Sanford Budick, *The Dividing Muse: Images of Sacred Disjunction in Milton's Poetry,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

The marvellous Miltonic neologism *speakable* both suggests what makes evil itself so attractive and helps to answer, from within the terms of the poem itself, the problem posed by the *unimaginability* of hate in Heaven. Between the two episodes of listening to the angel Raphael and to this other angel, Satan, Eve has come a long way – into a new kind of language, and one that is being hijacked by the devil. So persuasive is that new language that the infection that began in heaven now spreads to the newly created Earth.

6

To understand that we need to know more about Satan and how he is presented. At the moment of Satan's self-invention (he learns on meeting his daughter Sin at the gates of Hell), it was both Sin itself, but also the Sign (or at least one very powerful aspect of signification), which came into being. She tells him the story of her own origin and so reminds him of his own. The passage recalls the birth of Athena to Zeus:

> Then shining heavenly fair, a Goddess armed
> Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seized
> All the host of Heaven; back they recoiled afraid
> At first, and called me Sin, and for a Sign
> Portentous held me; (II 760)

But the angels soon grow to like her the more familiar she seems, and Satan has sex with her. Quite apart from that salacious allegory, Milton is clearly playing with the sounds here, and he was more than capable of speculating about the etymology of Sin, in the way that W.W. Skeat (the great nineteenth century philologist, student of Old English, and one of the minds present in that remarkable work of scholarship, the *OED*) does: "AS *synne* represents ... an Idg (Indo-germanic) type ... *sont*. It is the abstract sb. allied to L. *sons* (stem *sonti-*), sinful, guilty, orig. 'being,' real; and Curtius

refers this (along with Icel. *sannr*, true, very, Goth. *sunja*, the truth, sooth) to the root ES, to be; remarking that ... language regards the guilty man as the man *who it was.*"[23] He further connects it with the present participle of the Greek verb to be, *eont-, eon,* = *esôn*, being. The link is perhaps most obvious in the case of the modern German *sein*. Even if Skeat is wrong, the train of thought his etymological survey launches is perfectly Miltonic.[24]

On the surface, though, Milton's pun goes in a different direction, not towards being but towards meaning. Sin is a sign, and the obvious implication is that Sin is a necessary precondition for signs. Sin is named by the angels, and they are right that she is a portent, or something monstrous. But this naming of Sin, to make the pun with *sign,* is arbitrary, shifting language from a natural to a merely artificial or customary basis. There is no cognoscence, only coincidence, in the pun. From now on that is how language will mean, and Satan is already an expert. That was exactly why Aristotle objected to verbal ambiguity in the *Rhetoric.*[25] He wanted words to be clearer and more fixed than that. Milton, though, exploits them for the unsettling impact they can have.

23 Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1879-82, 1974, p. 563.

24 I offer further analysis of Milton's etymological wordplay in *The Satanic Epic*, pp. 217-38.

25 Aristotle seems to have a special dislike for *homonymia* and *amphibola,* since they violate that fundamental virtue that he calls *hellenismos*, i.e., clarity, *saphe neia*. *Rhetoric* II, 24, 1401a 13-23, III, 2, 1404b 35-40, and 5, 1407a 33-65; cf. the briefer reference at *Poetics* 22, 1458a 18. What Aristotle objects to, it seems obvious, is Sophism. See the discussion in W. Bedell Stanford's unjustly neglected *Ambiguity in Greek Literature,* Oxford, Blackwell, 1939, pp. 6-34. It is true that Aristotle defends Homer from the charge of using puns (*Rhet.* III, 11, 1412a 33-6), but that only goes to show how little real sympathy he had with the multivalence of poetic language.

7

As we have seen, the word *evil* does not escape this labyrinth of language. Far from it. Yet there is another insidious pun on this word that goes to the heart of what Milton is doing in the poem. The real problem for men and women, he thinks, is not the world as created by God and perverted by Satan, but each other. Sexual difference is the best thing about the world (indeed its saving grace),[26] and the cause of all the trouble. Through Adam's helpless love for Eve he decides to share the fruit with her. And why did Eve eat it? As the poem demonstrates several times, Eve's feeling of inequality, of belatedness, is what Satan has to exploit. A good example is her speech after eating the fruit, when she thinks she might not share it with Adam,

> But keep the odds of Knowledge in my power
> Without Copartner? So to add what wants
> In Femal Sex, the more to draw his Love,
> And render me more equal, and perhaps,
> A thing not undesireable, sometime
> Superior; for inferior who is free? (IX 820-25)

This thinking of Eve's is clearly far more than the biblical text warrants, but it is the heart of Milton's interpretation of the Fall. The echo in that last line of Satan's thinking before his rebellion makes it even more ominous. And the word *evil*, at least in Adam's mind, and so in ours, is linked to his wife's name. "O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give eare / To that false Worm" (IX 1067). As Christopher Ricks puts it, Adam "proclaims that the word *evil* is derived from Eve, and that evil derives from her."[27]

26 Eve's love for Adam leads her to beg his forgiveness, at the height of his fury, and reawakens his love for her. This in turn leads to the experience of regeneration and redemption. For the connection with grace, see *The Satanic Epic,* pp. 274-300.

27 Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1963, p. 103.

Nevertheless Milton makes one very important distinction between his version of the story and the one common in the tradition. This relation of Eve to evil was solidified, for speakers of English at least, because she received that name in Genesis only after the Fall. But in *Paradise Lost* she is addressed as Eve before the Fall, notably by the angel Raphael at VIII 172.[28] There is thus no inherent connection between *Eve* and *evil*, only an accidental similarity which Adam seizes on in the first heat of his fallen reaction. But the similarity is there and, like that of *Sin* and *sign*, requires all readers at least to think through the issue again, and distinguish between accidental and essential parallels.

Before the fall, Adam had been as perplexed as any classical philosopher about hate in heaven or the source of evil: following her dream, he tells his wife, without knowing Satan was behind it, that "this uncouth dream, [was] of evil sprung I fear" (V 98). Thus far his prelapsarian insight can take him. Yet no further, for he cannot answer the question, his variant of Augustine's *unde malum?*, that he then poses: "Yet evil whence? in thee can harbour none."[29] That he can later change his mind and make the Eve/evil pun suggests how serious is the problem he now faces.

It is only when he finally puts together the story Eve has told him about her unusual trip to the tree with the Son's prediction about the serpent's head and bruises that he can see what has happened, and whence this evil:

> thy seed shall bruise
> The serpent's head; piteous amends, unless
> Be meant, whom I conjecture, our grand Foe
> Satan, who in the Serpent hath contriv'd

[28] Leonard, *Naming in Paradise*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 35-36. For further word-play with Eve's name, including the common *deceived* = 'dis-Eved,' see Shoaf, *Poet of Duality,* 1993, pp. ix-xix.

[29] See the analysis of Augustine's *Confessions,* vii, 5, in Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970, p. 86-90. See also Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 387-440.

> Against us this deceit: to crush his head
> Would be revenge indeed (X 1031-36)

So he finally realizes that the serpent was Satan. He had supposed before that "some cursed fraud / Of Enemie hath beguil'd thee, yet unknown" (IX 904-5), but he now makes the key move anticipated by the poem's opening question and answer ("Who first seduc'd them ... ? the infernal Serpent," I 33-4), and realizes the meaning of the story he is living out.[30] He has made the connection and worked out the supernatural source of the infection for himself.

This newly informed Adam would be able also to resolve the earlier innocent "admiration and deep Muse" about "Hate in Heaven". The answer to the implied question, explicit in the Vergilian model ("*tantaene animis caelestibus irae?*" *Aeneid* I.11) is quite simply "Yes," however unimaginable. Because of the story of rebellion, because of the war, there is hate in heaven. And the real problem is that the anger and hate is not just on one side. Good and evil are not so easily sorted or apportioned between God and Satan. The subjects of classical epic, the wrath of stern Achilles, the rage of Turnus, the ire of Juno, supposedly transcended by Milton's Christian narrator, or so he claims (IX 14-18), are all here again in the celestial battle, in the "wrauth" of the Son at VI 826, or of God at VI 59, and the problem for many readers is that, in spite of the narrator's claims (and those of many theologians),[31] their wrath is not obviously different from that of

30 Georgia Christopher is right to make this the turning point of the poem in *Milton and The Science of the Saints,* Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 163-72. It is when the promise of redemption is recalled, and so begins to work.

31 One example from a recent discussion on the Milton-list (20.3.2002): 'one must distinguish between the disinterested nature of divine wrath and the interested nature of satanic anger in order to account for the actions of Milton's God. Wrath is a function of an impersonal will and as such is the very essence of one aspect of how Milton's God loves humankind. Satanic anger, on the other hand, is a function of a personal ego fraught with anxieties. Wrath reveals something about the object to which it is directed, while anger reveals something about the source

their predecessors. In Milton's poem, Juno's ire, or that more general "anger in the minds of the gods", is reproduced not only in Satan's resentment but in the biblical "wrauth awakt" of God, giving off smoke and flame in "dusky wreathes" (even at this moment Milton cannot resist a pun).[32])

> So spake the Sovran voice, and Clouds began
> To darken all the Hill, and smoak to rowl
> In duskie wreathes, reluctant flames, the signe
> Of wrauth awak't ... (VI 56-9)

The Christian poet might have wanted God's wrath to be utterly other than Achilles' and Juno's or Neptune's, but if so, he brought that well-known biblical emotion dangerously close to the classical: indeed the passage which reduces classical epic to varieties of anger follows by only 4 lines Milton's statement about God's "Anger and just rebuke and judgement giv'n" (IX 10). Putting biblical and classical so closely together must mean that we are to think them together, just as we must with "hate in heaven." In more than one way, the poem shows, in spite of itself perhaps, that evil is produced by God, or at least by the rigid separation of good and evil that is then projected upwards and backwards to celestial origins. For that hate is also God's. It is the Son, indeed, supposedly an image of mildness, who says to the Father, "whom thou hat'st, I hate" (VI 734). So the problem of "hate in heaven" is indeed a general one, and Milton's careful phrasing is fully significant. Indeed he changes the biblical text in a slight but significant way: Psalm 139: 21 reads: "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? And am I not grieved with those that rise up

from which it is derived. Wouldn't the voice of prophecy be inconceivable as a form of expression without an attendant notion of wrath?'

32 Indeed there may be a triple pun here, since *reluctant* means 'writhing,' *OED* 1, as both Fowler and Leonard explain *ad loc.* Flannagan ignores them and says that 'the flames are reluctant because they, as they are personified, hesitate to proclaim the terror of God's wrath.' Leonard points out that this modern sense of the word, *OED* 2b, is in any case a Miltonic coinage.

against thee?" In the original, God is hated: in Milton's poem, he becomes the active hater, and his gentle Son imitates him.

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Abstract

Paradise Lost est un poème épique qui traite de l'origine du mal. Milton y reprend des histoires tirées de la Bible et des apocryphes, principalement le mythe d'Adam et Eve, qu'il retravaille sous la forme d'une épopée classique sur le modèle de Homère et de Virgile. Le poème est ainsi une sorte de défi aux modèles classiques comme aux sources bibliques qu'il réécrit. D'une manière générale, on peut voir ce que les théologiens nomment 'le problème du mal' comme un effet de l'attribution du bien à Dieu. Mais comme on peut s'y attendre de la part d'un grand poète, le défi le plus intéressant posé par Milton à ses sources bibliques réside dans le jeu sur les mots associés au mal. La Haine, la Désobéissance, l'Enfer, le Péché, la Mort, la Colère – et le Mal lui-même, sont des mots clés dans le texte. Cet article montre comment l'idée du mal prend naissance à travers le langage et comment, de quelque chose d'inimaginable, il devient une réalité verbale. L'exploration de ces mots par Milton ne subvertit pas le texte sacré à la façon de Salman Rushdie dans sa réécriture d'épisodes tirés du Coran et de la tradition coranique. Mais elle révèle à quel point Milton était troublé par les contradictions et difficultés que recèlent les récits bibliques. Ainsi, il ne se dérobe pas devant les implications de la colère de Dieu ou de la 'haine dans les cieux': il reprend même en les intensifiant les mots du psaume 139, et fait que le Fils ressent lui aussi de la haine, tout comme Dieu. Même si, sur le plan narratif, Satan est bien la source du mal et nous sommes témoins de la réalisation d'Adam que le serpent est effectivement Satan, plus profondément la contamination du mal, comme le suggère le poème de sa façon sérieuse et ludique, se situe au niveau du langage lui-même.