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Ambiguous words: Post-lapsarian language in Paradise Lost

LIAM D. HAYDON

Paradise Lost is a poem intimately concerned with tracing the limits of its own narrative. The epic voice, whether in the invocations or other interjections, makes explicit comment on the constructedness of the poem: ‘Say first’; ‘the copious matter of my song’; ‘half yet remains unsung’; ‘I now must change/ Those notes to tragic’.¹ Uriel warns the disguised Satan that no ‘created mind can comprehend’ (III. 705) the works of God, not even angels, and so are unable ‘to glorify/ The great work-master’ (III. 695–6) to the level His works deserve. Michael and Raphael both explain to Adam that they cannot accurately relate heavenly or prophetic deeds, but instead are ‘measuring things in heaven by things on earth’ (VI.893). These interjections and caveats draw attention to the arbitrary nature (and so ineffectiveness) of human language when faced with the task of expressing divinity.

The loyal angels understand that this inability to properly express arises from the difference between divine and angelic nature; God is ineffably infinite, and he ‘formed the powers of heaven/ Such as he pleased, and circumscribed their being’ (v. 824–5). This is not, however, as Abdiel makes clear, an irreconcilable or alienating circumscription, but rather a way in which they can relate to and praise God; As Maura Brady has pointed out, in *Paradise Lost* ‘proper admiration comes only from being thoughtfully perplexed’.² As with the food offered to Raphael by Adam and Eve, unfallen creatures understand that this difference is part of their relationship with God – ‘one almighty is, from whom/ All things proceed, and up to him return’ (v. 469–70).

For the fallen angels, however, language becomes a key site of contest. Their rebellion is, at least partly, linguistic. Satan and his crew constantly attempt to uncouple the unity of sign and signifier that is guaranteed by divine language. Their contestation of God’s authority is initially expressed by denying the Son

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¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 1.27, 3.413, 7.21, 9.5–6. All references to *Paradise Lost* are from this edition and are henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

² Maura Brady, ‘Space and the Persistence of Place in *Paradise Lost*’, *Milton Quarterly* 41, (2007), 167–82 (at 177).

the title 'Messiah', presuming that the challenge to the name is also a challenge to the nature of the Son. Satan assembles the rebels after testing them with 'Ambiguous words and jealousies, to sound/ Or taint integrity' (v. 702–03); that is, he checks whether they are able to perceive the duality of his own speech which would be a sign that they are already, in some sense, rebelling. The war in Heaven, where '[t]he conceptual battleground matters most', is marked by a series of verbal disputes, as the rebels seek to define, and therefore control or appropriate, the terms of the combat.³ This culminates in a series of puns after the invention of artillery, as the fallen angels revel in the plurality of meanings inherent in language which is not guaranteed by divinity.

The epic voice expresses the other side of this issue: acutely aware that *Paradise Lost* is all too fallen, it details the paradox of attempting divine representation in post-lapsarian language, and the inherent impossibility of such a task. *Paradise Lost* thus becomes in some sense a constant re-enactment of the Fall, as the narrative voice strives for the unity and perfection of divine language, but continuously lapses into fragmented, imperfect expression.

That the language of *Paradise Lost* is open or contingent is not, in itself, a new observation. A number of prominent commentators have demonstrated aspects of this ambiguity, though they tend to stress that it ultimately makes the poem more, not less, cohesive. Christopher Ricks has argued that the epic voice deploys exclusionary puns; that is, words that produce a meaning only to deny it. For Ricks, terms such as 'serpent error' (vii. 302) or 'wanton ringlets' (iv. 306) have their 'evil meaning consciously and ominously excluded', becoming 'winding (not *sin*)' and 'unrestrained (not *lascivious*)'.⁴ In this interpretation, it is the reader, not the narrator, who is fallen; the narrator can consciously exclude the contradictory or sinful ambiguities which the fallen reader cannot fully escape.

Stanley Fish similarly places the 'disruption' in the reader, rather than the poem itself, demonstrating that many of Milton's metaphors function by suggesting an equivalence that is subsequently shown to be false. Fish contends that since for the reader 'the reading experience takes place in time' the image is constructed gradually, albeit too quickly for conscious deliberation, which provides to the audience 'a perspective that is beyond the field of its perception', and thus 'a sense of what cannot be described and what we cannot apprehend'.⁵ Fish, in support of his thesis, reads these moments as types of experiential education, reminding the reader that they are fallen and cannot comprehend the supernatural elements of the poem to the same extent as the narrator.

Peter Herman extends the argument beyond the epic simile, arguing that *Paradise Lost* relies upon 'a poetics of incertitude', contesting that the poem

³ Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England 1640–1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 224.

⁴ Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 110.

⁵ Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (Berkeley: Macmillan, 1967), 23–7.

systematically establishes oppositions (structurally, narratively and metaphorically) which are left deliberately unresolved.⁶ He demonstrates that the use of 'or' in the epic simile is primarily deployed to allow a 'choice between different items but without indicating a preference between them' (185), and this unresolved (and indeed irresolvable) choice is the origin of a general sense of disorientation and indeterminacy in the poem. The poem, for Herman, is finally stabilized by 'equally powerful opposing forces, like massive tectonic plates pressing against each other' (203). That is, the poem's very ambiguities are bounded and controlled by a narrative figure to produce a unified meaning from the system of self-conflicting metaphors.

These modes of reading *Paradise Lost* all assume that the poem ultimately regains cohesion – that is, the ambiguities are temporary, educative and ultimately contained by a unifying epic voice. I wish to reorient these readings towards a different conclusion, arguing that the poem's ambiguities and oppositions are the necessary effects of its post-lapsarian production, and they are never finally resolved. I contend that they demonstrate the *limits* of the narrative voice itself, which cannot render the divine or diabolic without recourse to scripture or inadequate comparative, which is all that is available through fallen language.

In this way, my reading accords, at least in methodology, with the group known as the New Milton Critics, who aim 'to explore textual moments of contradiction and ambivalence' through close reading and histories of scholarship.⁷ The New Milton Criticism is thus committed to restoring the ambiguity of the poem which is frequently closed off by critical or editorial decisions. These critics see throughout *Paradise Lost* an open-endedness which is an unresolved product of critical inquiry on Milton's part, an invitation to 'multivalent and open-ended reading'. However, I seek here (in part) to orient that multivalency to a kind of self-aware cohesion of incoherence: that is, the multivalency of Milton's epic can, taken as a whole, reveal something about the poem, and the language in which it is inscribed.⁸

In many ways my – or any – discussion of fallen and unfallen language will produce paradoxes, or, more accurately, re-produce the paradoxes it identifies within *Paradise Lost*. However, by applying the methodologies of deconstruction to Milton's epic I suggest we can see these unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) paradoxes not as the frustrated failure to achieve a poetic goal, but rather as offering a sense of the endless signification that characterizes fallen language. That is, identifying these paradoxes, and recognizing them as the limits of post-lapsarian expression, is in itself an important goal for readers of the poem. In *Paradise Lost*, the glorious achievement is not in overcoming

⁶ Peter C. Herman, '“Paradise Lost”, the Miltonic “Or,” and the Poetics of Incertitude', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 43 (2003), 188–211 (at 182). Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer, 'Introduction', in Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer (eds.), *The New Milton Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–24 (at 10).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

this multivalence, but in expressing it at all. In doing so, it invites its fit audience to recognize the limits of their own language and understanding, and find in those very limits a renewed desire to strive towards the unattainable perfection that the poem seeks to fleetingly capture.

The primary function of the loyal angels in *Paradise Lost* is explanation: Raphael is tasked to ‘Converse with Adam [. . .] and such discourse bring on/ As may advise him of his happy state’ (v. 230–34), and Michael to ‘reveal/ To Adam what shall come in future days’ (xi. 114–15). Both Uriel and Abdiel reveal part of the narrative of creation to Satan (the creation of Earth and Man, the role of the Son in creation, respectively), and Gabriel, as well as guarding Eden, interprets for him the golden scales placed in the sky at the close of Book 4.

Both Michael and Raphael express the difficulties of representing God’s work(s) to Adam, since those works are ultimately explicable only by reference to themselves. Michael at first presents Adam with a vision, achieved not through description, but drawn from the divine: ‘from the well of life three drops instilled./ So deep the power of these ingredients pierced/ Even to the inmost seat of mental sight’ (xi. 416–18). The ‘well of life’ is, as Fowler notes, the ‘source of Christian grace’; Adam therefore only has access to the visions Michael presents as a gift direct from God.⁹ Yet even with this visionary power, Michael is nonetheless required as an interpreter, as Adam realizes after his first vision, addressing Michael as ‘teacher’ (xi. 450), and seeking an explanation of the events he has seen unfold. This grace proves overpowering for Adam (just as, even in his unfallen state, conversing with God tired him (vii. 453–9)), with Michael noting his weariness and accompanying lack of understanding: ‘I perceive/ Thy mortal sight to fail; objects divine/ Must needs impair and weary human sense’ (xii. 8–10). Michael resolves to accommodate Adam by relating the rest of his knowledge orally. However, Raphael had already outlined the difficulties involved in relating divine action to non-heavenly creatures.

Raphael begins the story of the war in heaven by asking ‘how shall I relate/ To human sense the invisible exploits/ Of warring spirits’ (v. 564–6), and gives as his answer a form of accommodation that cannot fully represent the reality of heavenly action:

and what surmounts the reach
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
By likening spiritual to corporeal forms
As may express them best. (v. 571–4)

⁹ 11.413–5n, finding as biblical precedent John 4:10 and Psalms 36:9.

Raphael is clear, here, that his narrative will 'surmount' or surpass Adam and Eve's experience and understanding. As such, his attempt to 'express them best' is not a triumph of representation, but rather a recognition of the need for accommodation. The verb 'likening' is further stressed in the following lines, where Heaven and Earth are 'Each to the other like' (V. 576), and its placement here suggests they are similar but not identical; this is heightened by 'may', which can, ambiguously, be either the conditional 'might' or definitive 'will'. The corporeal forms of Earth may resemble or 'shadow' (V. 575) the heavenly spirits, and this resemblance helps Adam and Eve understand what they will hear, but this very resemblance simultaneously emphasizes the fact that spiritual and corporeal are, ultimately, separate categories. Raphael himself makes this distinction earlier in his narrative when noting that the 'various degrees of substance' are 'Each in their several active Spheres assigned' (V. 474–7).

Raphael's narrative, in spite of his angelic nature, offers not perfect signification, but merely the closest relationship between signified and signifier he can devise. He restates the point twice, revealing he is 'measuring things in heav'n by things on earth' (VI. 893) and that the works of God he recounts are 'told as earthly notion can conceive' (VII. 179). The problem, though, is linguistic as well as hierarchical, as the preceding lines clarify, since those works 'to human ears/ Cannot without process of speech be told' (VII. 177–8); though Raphael is speaking to pre-lapsarian Adam, the questions of speaking and hearing right still remain. The difficulty is stated most eloquently by the plaintive question that begins Raphael's account of creation: 'to recount almighty works/ what words or tongue of seraph can suffice/ Or heart of man suffice to comprehend?' (VII. 112–14). Though man, even unfallen man, is unable to fully comprehend the works of God and angels, the 'tongue of seraph' would in any case be insufficient to describe them: God functions as the inexpressible limit at which even angelic language falters.

It is Uriel's conversation with Satan (disguised as a cherub) that most fully reveals the limits of representation and comprehension. Uriel responds approvingly to Satan's statement that he intends to see and understand the works of God ('to know/ The works of God, thereby to glorify/ The great work-master [. . .] merits praise' (III. 694–7)), yet this approval is delivered with a warning on the impossibility of that task:

But what created mind can comprehend
 Their number, or the wisdom infinite
 That brought them forth, but hid their causes deep. (III. 705–07)

Uriel here traces the difficulties inherent in seeking to understand, and therefore those in seeking to explain, or describe, God. As Milton makes clear in the *Christian Doctrine*, angels are not omniscient, nor able to fully comprehend the divine mystery:

Angeli boni non intuentur in Deo omnia, ut fingent Papistae, sed tantum per revelationem ea quae visum est Deo, alia per eminentem quandam ratiocinationem; multa tamen ignorant.

[The good angels do not see into all things in respect of God, as the Papists imagine, but [see] only, through revelation, those things which God has decided to [reveal], and other things through a certain outstanding process of reasoning; but many things they do not know.]¹⁰

Of course, the *Christian Doctrine* should not be directly conflated with the doctrinal elements of the poem. However, Milton notes in the epistle to the *Christian Doctrine* that it was designed as a scholarly aid, to be kept ‘ad manum mihi esset’ [close at hand]¹¹ – that is, no separate project to his poetry, but an important theological guide, which is at least suggestive of the doctrinal assumptions made by *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, we can observe that although the angels of *Paradise Lost* impart knowledge, they are themselves also bound by the conditions of the incomprehensible or unutterable: as Raphael and Uriel are aware, angelic language and comprehension, as well as human understanding, are lacking in the quest to make divine action intelligible.

Milton argues in *Of True Religion* that all knowledge of God emanates from and through Him and His works, since ‘[n]o man or angel can know how God would be worshipped and served unless God reveal it.’¹² *Of Reformation*, similarly, outlines that ‘The wisdom of God created understanding, fit and proportionable to truth, the object and end of it.’¹³ The crucial phrase here is ‘fit and proportionable’: This is a glorifying relationship, in which the angels are given enough knowledge to understand their own state and relationship to God (which is to say, truth). However, this is not the same as understanding God fully, since their consciousness has an ‘object’ and an ‘end’ of understanding truth. That is, remaining unfallen requires a constant striving towards truth (God, divine perfection), even if that truth remains out of reach until God finally confers it.

That ‘proportionable’ relationship does, however, guarantee the correctness of angelic language, even if it prevents a perfectly accurate description of the divinity which always remains outside of created understanding. As Mary Nyquist notes:

Both in *Paradise Lost* and in *Paradise Regained*, understanding and its counterpart, standing, are presented as a continued abiding in the truth, a staying in touch

¹⁰ John Milton, *The Complete Works of John Milton*, ed. John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–), 7:351 (*Christian Doctrine* I. ix). I have used the Hale-Cullington here as a better edition of the *Christian Doctrine*; the Oxford Milton would generally be preferred throughout, but other prose works cited in this article have not yet appeared in that series, and so the Yale editions continue to be used.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7:4 (*Christian Doctrine* ‘Epistle’).

¹² *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 8:419. Further references to Milton’s prose are taken from this edition and abbreviated CPW.

¹³ CPW 1:566.

with presence; both result from a still, constant, and unspectacular refusal to break into the world outside the Word.¹⁴

That is, a refusal to consider the Word as anything other than perfect and complete is a condition of standing – the loyal angels do not so much refuse to break out of the Word as to realize that the ‘world outside the Word’ is the chaotic absence of divinity. The reversal of this formulation is also true: the fallen creatures of the epic exist entirely outside of the Word, in the Derridean realm where the perfect unity of the sign is replaced by the endless play of unfixed signification:

[A] system in which the central signified, the original and transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely.¹⁵

That is, outside of a transcendental *guarantee* of meaning (the *logos*, or God), language becomes determined only by itself, as each utterance gains meaning from every other utterance with which it associates or disassociates itself; it is therefore unable to express a singular concept without also generating its corollaries, similitudes and absences.

Thomas Martin has demonstrated that satanic language is Derridean in its emphasis on decentring, producing ‘an attack on language at the level of difference’.¹⁶ Satan, he argues, imposes an opposition to the *logos* as a revolt against the perfect hierarchical unity of God’s creation (and the language of that creation). Martin focuses on Satan’s language after his fall, but Satan’s rebellion itself is linguistic: the council he calls after Messiah is anointed is in large part to express his doubt that the name and the merit of Messiah are equal. Satan, having ironically supposed that the positions of the rebel angels are become ‘merely titular’ (v. 774), contends that the Son has ‘us eclipsed under the name/ Of king anointed’ (v. 776–7). The line break highlights the disjunction between title and reality that Satan attempts to create, as if Messiah’s title of ‘king anointed’ were just a title and he did not ‘by right of merit [reign]’ (vi. 43). Satan certainly misunderstands the nature of hierarchical merit, but I suggest it is especially revealing that he does so by stressing the ambiguity of language; in attempting to separate the title ‘Messiah’ from its deserving recipient (indeed, the only recipient it could ever signify), Satan is attempting to undermine the throne of God by denying the perfect unity of divine language. Satan endeavours to destabilize the perfect unity of sign and signifier as expressed by divinity.

¹⁴ Mary Nyquist, ‘The Father’s Word/Satan’s Wrath’, *PMLA* 100 (1985), 187–202 (at 191).

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Alan Bass (ed.), *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2002), 354.

¹⁶ Thomas L. Martin, ‘On the Margin of God: Deconstruction and the Language of Satan in Paradise Lost’, *Milton Quarterly* 29 (1995), 41–47 (at 45).

A number of critics, following Empson, have argued for dishonesty, in God's actions (holding back his angelic forces, or releasing Satan from his chains); naturally, for those of this view, God's speeches are also dishonest, lacking in this divine unity.¹⁷ These claims have been refuted by Dennis Danielson, and more recently (and more critically) Richard Strier, and this ongoing debate is not the focus of the argument here.¹⁸ I take it, as Strier broadly does, that the God of *Paradise Lost* is (or is supposed to be) analogous to the biblical *logos*; deviations or failings of Milton's God, such as the famous entanglement of 'if I foreknew,/ Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault' (III. 118–9), are, I suggest, only further evidence of the failings of fallen language and comprehension, rather than failings of the divine.

Satan revels in the newfound presence of linguistic ambiguity during the taunting exchange that precedes the revelation of gunpowder, beginning the second day of the war in Heaven. Satan addresses his troops in a speech full of puns, the double meanings of which only the rebels can grasp:

Vanguard, to right and left the front unfold;
 That all may see who hate us, how we seek
 Peace and composure, and with open breast
 Stand ready to receive them, if they like
 Our overture, and turn not back perverse;
 But that I doubt, however witness heaven,
 Heaven witness thou anon, while we discharge
 Freely our part: ye who appointed stand
 Do as you have in charge, and briefly touch
 What we propound, and loud that all may hear. (vi. 558–67)

Here, 'open breast', 'overture', 'discharge', 'in charge' and 'touch' all serve as puns on the placing or firing of cannon ('touch' is itself already laboured, having previously been used in similar double sense at vi. 479–80 and 520). These puns are given particular force by their placement at the end of lines, forcing a momentary pause in comprehension which offers the possibility of a second meaning: 'discharge/ Freely our part', for example, loses much of its force as a pun if 'discharge' is not isolated by the line break. Milton may be slyly referring to this effect (common throughout the poem) in his note on the verse, when he notes the poem has 'the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another'. Though usually taken as a rejection of end-stopped or rhyming lines, the movement between the verses has the momentary effect of creating various potential senses – here deliberately activated by Satan, though all fallen poetry of this style might do this unintentionally.

Although Satan's parody is later understood by Raphael as 'scoffing in ambiguous words' (vi. 568), this comes only with the benefit of hindsight; the

¹⁷ William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

¹⁸ Dennis Danielson, *Milton's Good God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Richard Strier, 'Milton's Fetters, or, Why Eden Is Better Than Heaven', in Herman and Sauer (eds.), *Milton Criticism*, 25–48.

loyal angels are held 'suspense/ Collected stood within our thoughts amused' (vi. 580–81) – that is, perplexed by Satan's speech – and they only understand his deception of the 'hollow truce' (vi. 578) once the cannon are revealed. The loyal angels are incapable of seeing the ambiguity of Satan's words; Satan continually gestures towards peace and destruction simultaneously, but the loyal angels cannot perceive more than a single meaning at once. For them, the speech is first an unexpected offer of 'peace and composure' and then the revelation of the invention of gunpowder, but never both together in the way it is for Satan.

Furthermore, 'back perverse' may gain a treble meaning here by pointing back to the metaphorical use of cannon earlier in the epic. There is already a pun in 'perverse', on 'evil' and 'facing the wrong way', suggesting that the loyalty of the angels who oppose Satan is itself wicked or misguided. Additionally, the phrase recalls the description of Satan's volatile mind on Niphates' top, which 'like a devilish engine back recoils' (iv. 17). The phrase is repeated in the prose prologue to Book Six, where 'devilish engines' is the phrase used for the invention of cannon, reinforcing the link between the travesties of Satan's mind and his own invention. Satan reprises the theme in his soliloquy as he takes the form of the snake, noting that 'Revenge, at first though sweet,/ Bitter ere long back on itself recoils' (ix. 171–2). 'Recoil' is the oppositional force applied on artillery by the explosion of the powder, which produced a huge stress on the cannon itself. The violent oppositional forces involved in firing a cannon could easily cause the breech (the rear of the barrel) to explode, especially as the casting process often resulted in a slightly imperfect chamber. The sequence of phrases from *Paradise Lost*, when taken together, provide the image of a misfiring cannon, offering an unintentional satanic pun on the self-destructive failure of his own 'perverse' enterprise.

Belial, after the initial volley, is found 'in like gamesome mood' (vi. 620), and offers his own set of puns, conflating the rebel angels' initial dialogue with cannonballs: 'the terms we sent were terms of weight,/ Of hard contents, and full of force urged home' (vi. 621–2). Punning is not restricted exclusively to Satan, and its availability to all the devils reveals the play of meanings to be a consequence of fallen language.

Nigel Smith notes that in these exchanges (and elsewhere) 'Satan confuses parlaying with actual combat.'¹⁹ Such a reading fits with the conception of Satan as a parody of the great heroes of classical epic, which is 'developed in several scornful flying matches recalling exchanges between heroes', although to his discredit 'Satan vaunts excessively but then foregoes single combat'.²⁰ However, the 'parlay' between Satan and the loyal angels is not a replacement for, but rather a crucial extension of, the (allegorical) war in heaven. The vaunting is a natural consequence of Satan's linguistic fall, sig-

¹⁹ Smith, *Literature and Revolution*, 224.

²⁰ Barbara K. Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 59–60.

nifying a change in conceptual ability which has become even more important than the battle itself; if Satan can change the meanings of words, then God is neither almighty nor invincible.

The verbal exchanges form a key part of the war because both parties strive to set the terms of that rebellion. Michael addresses Satan as ‘Author of evil, unknown till they revolt/ Unnamed in heaven, now plenteous’ (vi. 262–3), suggesting that for heavenly creatures knowing and naming are the same event. That is, angelic intuition is linguistic: once an object or concept exists, angelic language expands to accommodate a name for it, and since angelic language is the perfect, divine language, the name and the thing are perfectly synchronous – to know the thing is to grasp the name. This is at once reminiscent of fallen language, and yet profoundly different from it: Michael’s intuition relies on – and stems from – his proportional relationship to the divine, and his participation in a series of signs that has as its immovable centre the *logos* that fuses signifier and signified, a guarantee of his angelic knowledge and wisdom.

Satan’s reply contests Michael’s construction, and interrogates his use of the neologism ‘evil’: ‘Err not that so shall end/ The strife which thou callst evil, but we style/ The strife of glory’ (vi. 288–90). The reversal makes explicit Satan’s position, already revealed to the rebels at his council which questioned the name ‘Messiah’, that he is better placed than Michael (and therefore, by extension, God) to understand the true nature of things. Satan’s response here reveals the fundamental nature of the war in heaven, which is, at its root, a contest over language (or at least authority as manifested in language): Satan denies that Michael – or God – has the right to name, which is in angelic understanding to define, good and evil.

The verb ‘style’, however, is deployed throughout *Paradise Lost* to signify false naming (though Milton does have the positive sense of the word, as a noun, in his discussion of pre-lapsarian prayer (v. 146) and the epic style (ix. 20)). Beelzebub uses the term at the Council of Hell as he rhetorically ponders the correct titles for the devils: ‘Thrones and imperial powers, offspring of heaven,/ Ethereal virtues, or these titles now must we renounce and changing style be called/ Princes of Hell?’ (ii. 310–12). The devils, of course, no longer have any claim to titles, as Satan reveals upon his return after the temptation. Addressing the devils by a similar list of titles, he falsely declares them now to be ‘in possession such, not only of right’ (x. 461), revealing that before his conquest of Earth the angelic ranks were indeed ‘merely titular’ (v. 774) – which of course they remain, God’s punishment of the transformation to serpents serving ‘to dash their pride’ (x. 577).

Michael, offering comfort to Adam, and commenting on human history, uses the verb in a similar fashion in his accounts of Enoch and Babel. The contemporaries of Enoch strive ‘for glory done/ Of triumph, to be styled great conquerors’ (xi. 694–5). The titles given by humans, though, are immediately derided as false, as Michael provides the true alternative: ‘Destroyers rightlier called, and plagues of men’ (xi. 697). Nimrod, too, is described as taking a

title not bestowed by the superior understanding of heaven: 'A mighty hunter thence shall he be styled/ Before the Lord, as in despite of heaven' (xii. 33–4). The corrective offered against Nimrod is political-theological (he has 'Authority usurped, from God not given' (xii. 66)), but this is reflected linguistically, since he 'from rebellion shall derive his name' (xii. 36).

Satan himself uses the verb to further his claim that God is a usurper, referring to him as 'He mighty styled' (ix. 137). This periphrastic naming of God is common among the devils, who avoid the name of God, but also serves to underscore the linguistic difference that Satan represents, since 'styled' here reflects Satan's doubt on the nature of God's claim to the title 'almighty' by provoking a potential difference between the name and the attribute. Such a meaning is invoked by Satan in his disdainful response to Michael: 'mean-while thy utmost force,/ And join him named almighty to thy aid,/ I fly not' (vi. 293–5). Here, the trochee on the first two beats of 'Almighty' creates a strong double stress in the middle of the line, aurally linking the attribute 'almighty' to Satan's claim that it is only a name. Just as with Messiah, by questioning God's right to the title 'almighty', Satan presumes he can also deny him the attribute.

For the same reason, much of the temptation of Eve turns on his 'endeavours to replace God's adjective for the fruit – 'forbidden' – with others that will allow Eve to see it from a less unified, more vulnerable point of view'.²¹ Eve is tempted, at least in part, because she accepts the rationale of Satan's relabelling of the fruit as 'godlike food' (ix. 717) without questioning the ability and authority he assumes in order to rename at all. It is also worth noting that Eve's first response on being led to the tree of knowledge is to echo Satan's puns on the name of the fruit, perhaps suggesting that her temptation is already well underway: 'Fruitless to me, though fruit be here to excess' (ix. 648). Eve's wordplay recalls the fall of Satan, where linguistic flexibility comes before the actual act of rebellion.

The contest over naming has already been played out in Satan's earlier parlay on the nature of 'servility' and 'freedom'. His debate with Abdiel is the most directly instructive for Adam, and by extension the fallen readers of the poem. Satan contends that Abdiel is part of an army that serves because they know no better:

At first I thought that liberty and heaven
To heavenly souls had been all one; but now
I see that most through sloth had rather serve,
Ministering spirits, trained up in feast and song;
Such hast thou armed, the minstrelsy of heaven,
Servility with freedom to contend. (vi. 164–69)

²¹ Jean E. Graham, 'Fruit So Various: A Word Analysis in Paradise Lost', *Milton Quarterly* 24 (1990), 25–30 (at 26).

Here, again, Satan's point is made by a pun, or perhaps false etymological resemblance, on 'ministering' and 'minstrelsy', as well as the implied equivalence between serving and 'servility'. These distinctions, as well as the explicit contrast between 'liberty' and 'heaven', reveals Satan's misunderstanding of the nature of divine hierarchy. Abdiel immediately and unequivocally refutes Satan's argument: 'Unjustly thou deprav'st it with the name/ Of servitude to serve whom God ordains' (vi. 174–5). Service to God, or His ordained, is freedom for Abdiel; the only servitude is in serving 'the unwise, or him who hath rebelled' (ix. 179). The parlay with Abdiel centres on both the act of angelic servitude itself, but also the name, as Satan's succession of puns and jibes makes clear. The very fact of competing naming systems is evidence of Satan's fall away from the perfect intuition demonstrated by Michael and Abdiel in heaven, and Raphael in narration, who immediately intuit both the nature of Satan, and the new names of the devils.

Satan's conflation of service and servility is rejected by other loyal angels as well. Gabriel asks Satan, when discovered next to Eve, 'who more than thou/ Once fawned, and cringed, and servilely adored/ Heaven's awful monarch?' (iv. 958–60). He makes clear, though, that the only servility involved in obeying and praising God is when that service and obedience are false – it is for this reason that he adopts Satan's language, not to suggest that all service of God is fawning and cringing, but to implicate Satan in his own charge. Gabriel is referring here, as revealed by his phrase 'sly hypocrite' (iv. 957), not to all of Satan's praise of God, but the day after the anointing of Messiah which the angels spend in dance, though for Satan it is only feigned joy ('all seemed well pleased, all seemed, but were not all' (v. 617)).

Satan's inability to understand the nature of servitude is the repeated motif of his council in heaven, as he argues that Messiah has 'us eclipsed under the name/ Of king anointed' (v. 776–7). This represents the failing of his angelic intuition, as he misunderstands the nature of service, and the nature of Messiah Himself. This is manifested, punningly, in his cosmological (mis)understanding on Niphates:

O thou that with surpassing glory crowned,
 Lookst from thy sole dominion like the God
 Of this new world; at whose sight all the stars
 Hide their diminished heads; to thee I call
 But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
 O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams. (iv. 32–7)

John Leonard notes the Sun/Son pun here, suggesting that the cosmological relationships established reflect the hierarchy of Lucifer and Messiah: 'Just as the morning star must fade before the sun, Lucifer the angel must yield precedence to the rising Messiah.'²² Yet in heaven this does not mean a

²² John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 1990.

reduction: in fact, to stand in proper proportion to God and Messiah is a glorification. Satan, however, falsely intuitively senses the necessity of a reduction: if the sun stands allegorically for the Son, and the star for Lucifer (and the other angels), then the phrase 'diminished heads' adopts a significance beyond the purely physical (stars cannot be seen in the day-time). In this allegorical scheme, it demonstrates Satan's belief that the elevation of Messiah entails an eclipsing of all other forms of angelic virtue. Satan's misunderstanding of his relationship with God impinges upon all of his understanding of His creation.

Adam, like Satan, begins to dissociate the name from the thing after the Fall, addressing Eve as 'thou serpent, that name best/ Befits thee' (x. 848–9). Adam has fallen away from the innate linguistic understanding which allowed a perfect link between what he named the animals and their being and qualities. The lines themselves may also be a pun on the Hebrew 'Heva', believed to be the root of 'Eve', and commonly translated as 'life': as D. C. Allen notes, there was a substantial tradition that when 'Heva' was pronounced with an aspirant it became 'serpent', so that 'a little tradition and some bad Hebrew stood behind [Adam's] remark'.²³ Adam's 'remark', then, is either a pun or a mistake; in whichever sense, it reveals that while he still has access to the universal language (prelapsarian Hebrew), it is nonetheless 'infected' by Sin (typologically pre-empting the allegorical Sin's prophecy that she will man's 'looks, words, actions all infect' (x. 608)), since Adam, like Beelzebub and Satan, is now also dealing in 'ambiguous words'.

The characters of the poem, then, are shown as moving into linguistic open-ness as they fall. The ability of language to signify in multivalent ways is one of the conditions of fallen language; its very openness serves as evidence that it has fallen away from the divine *logos*. For Satan, this is a legitimization of rebellion; for Adam, a constant reminder of his fallen state. As well as presenting this through the characters and action, *Paradise Lost* adopts this same ambiguity into its construction. The epic voice itself repeatedly deploys ambiguous phrasing, in order to undermine the similes and narrative structures it constructs.

As Christopher Ricks has demonstrated, the very fact that the possibilities have to be excluded reveals the openness and ambiguity of the language in which the poem is constructed. Descriptions of the serpent as 'sly' or 'Insinuating', like the 'Gordian twine' and filled with 'fatal guile' fit into the same pattern of punning that is the condition of all post-lapsarian expression in *Paradise Lost*.²⁴ John Leonard argues that these puns (or anti-puns) are 'a variety of prolepsis – the type of anachronism which treats future events as past. Milton's prolepses usually anticipate the Fall'.²⁵ It is that very prolepsis

²³ D. C. Allen, 'Milton and the Name of Eve', *Modern Language Notes* 74 (1959), 681–3.

²⁴ The descriptions are given at 4.347–9.

²⁵ John Leonard, 'Self-Contradicting Puns in *Paradise Lost*', in Thomas N. Corns (ed.), *A Companion to Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 394–401 (at 406).

that reveals the traumatic effects of the Fall on the poem. Even as *Paradise Lost* seeks to represent an unfallen world, it is disrupted by the Fall it can never fully escape.

These anti-puns collapse the poem's attempted distinction between fallen and unfallen language. They invoke the 'ambiguous words' characteristic of Satan and Adam, and however much the 'evil' meaning can be 'consciously' excluded, it lingers as an absence that is never entirely closed off. *Paradise Lost* thus reveals the impossibility of its own linguistic project; paradoxically, the closer it comes to a perfect unity of signifier and signified, the more that unity is revealed to be unreachable by 'mortal voice' (VII. 24). The Fall is the moment that resists signification precisely because it produces difference – the Fall is the movement from certainty to ambiguity, and so is the moment that remains completely unutterable by fallen tongue.

The tension between the *logos* and the free play of signifiers exists at the fundamental level of the poem's linguistic presence, is in fact a result of the poem's presence in post-lapsarian language. The theodicean element of the poem's project relies upon an ability, perhaps only momentary, to express the perfect language of God, while the very fact of the fallen nature of language prevents the poet, even aided by the muse (or Holy Spirit), from being able to do so.

This discontinuity is not played out allegorically, as for Spenser and Dante, but within language itself, as *Paradise Lost* deconstructs the linguistic structures it deploys even in the act of deploying them. These are the moments at which the poem deliberately undercuts its own structure, usually though not always within the epic simile, establishing knowledge or a comparison that is then shown to be false. I will borrow Derrida's term 'rupture' for these moments of indeterminacy.

On two occasions understanding is shown to be temporary or transient by placing it within the mode of 'dreaming'. God dismisses man's (presumed) belief that the tree of life is the material gateway to immortality by placing it in the province of the dream:

Lest therefore his now bolder hand
Reach also of the tree of life, and eat,
And live for ever, dream at least to live
For ever. (XI. 93–6)

That the tree of life offers only the 'dream' of immortality is Milton's addition to the Genesis source material in which the expulsion arises partly from fear that man will eat from the tree of life, and so countermand God's punishment: 'and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden.'²⁶ In *Paradise Lost* the tree of life seemingly offers no such guarantee of

²⁶ Genesis 3:22–3.

eternal life. Instead, the poem suggests that the trees of knowledge and life are metaphorical pledges of obedience and God's covenant respectively, rather than literal, material conveyors of those attributes whose names they bear. By dismissing man's presumption as a 'dream', God reveals the limited literariness of fallen understanding, in which the relationship between the signifier (the Tree) and the signified (immortality) cannot be fully comprehended by fallen man. Fallen man is limited to understanding through language, and so presumes that the *name* 'Tree of Life' also guarantees the *attribute* 'life'. This passage emphasizes what Satan has already understood: once apart from God, to name a thing is not to create or understand its attributes.

This passage's status as a rupture is highlighted by the use of 'dream', which links it to other passages within the poem at which presumed knowledge is undercut by making it dreamlike. In the prologue to Book Seven, Urania is described as superior to the pagan muse Calliope because 'thou art heav'nly, she an empty dream' (vii. 39). Adam informs Eve that dreams cannot be trusted since they fragment and distort reality: 'misjoining shapes/ Wild work produces oft, and most in dreams / Ill matching words' (v. 111–13).

The dismissing of experience as a dream also forms the basis of another rupture, describing the devils in their entrance to Pandæmonium as they:

Throng numberless, like that pygmean race
Beyond the Indian mount, or faerie elves,
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side
Or fountain some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth
Wheels her pale course, they on their mirth and dance
Intent, with jocund music charm his ear. (l. 780–87)

Here the long description of faerie revelry has, almost literally at its centre, a corrective that calls into question the reality of the comparison. The phrase 'Or dreams he sees' is prosodically powerful, as the sentence carries over a line break to provide rhythmic emphasis for the corrective; this emphasis is further enhanced because it marks the shift from description of location to description of action, becoming in the process a short clause distinct from the two longer clauses surrounding it. The passage is therefore doubly reductive; not only are the devils diminished to pygmys or faeries, but even that comparison is shown to be incorrect. At the very moment they swarm in huge numbers into their new-raised capitol, the devils' power is undermined and made equivalent only to a peasant's dream.

The rupture occurs most frequently when comparing the Christian supernatural to classical mythology. The prime example is the description of Mammon's fall(s):

in Ausonian land

Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell
 From heaven, they fabled, thrown by angry Jove
 Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn
 To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
 A summer's day; and with the setting sun
 Dropped from the zenith like a fallen star,
 On Lemnos the Ægean isle: Thus they relate,
 Erring; for he with this rebellious rout
 Fell long before. (l. 739–48)

A long sequence outlining the classical myth is constructed (competing, as Fowler notes, with *Iliad* I. 591–95), only to be confounded by the narrative intrusion of 'Erring'. The prosody, as in the example of the faerie elves above, enhances the effect of the intrusion, with the line break emphasizing the devastating effect of the corrective. Yet the break also reveals a fracture in the narrative voice itself: it marks a shift from second-hand narration of a fable back to the seemingly omniscient narrator. This provides a second function to the corrective intrusion, as what was initially taken to be the epic voice is shown to be a momentary imposition of another heteroglossia, controlled but not eradicated by the 'main' voice of the poem.

The standard reading of these ruptures – and Milton's deployment of classical myth in general – is that they are moments at which the narrative voice privileges its higher understanding or greater insight over that of previous generations. Earl Miner notes that Milton uses 'his dissimiles to distinguish between his truth and earlier falsehood';²⁷ Leah Whittington similarly argues that Milton 'sees a typological relationship between the classical past and the Christian present'.²⁸ In this distinguishing, the falsehood becomes myth, a way of interpreting truth that is not itself true. The falsehood of interpretative systems outside of *Paradise Lost* – and by extension the Christian tradition which it articulates (and refashions) – is appropriated to provoke a fuller understanding of the truth the poem seeks to impart. MacCaffrey expresses it thus, referring to the allegory of Truth-as-Osiris in *Areopagitica*:

[A] broken image is reconstituted by fitting together the fragments that fallen man has been able to collect in his myths, and at the same time the status of the image as the original of and superior to all the fragments is established.²⁹

The reader of *Paradise Lost* is thus invited to recognize the typological element of truth in these mythic 'fragments', even while rejecting them in favour of the restored 'original' truth the poem promises to articulate.

²⁷ Earl Miner, 'The Reign of Narrative in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Studies* 17(1983), 3–25 (at 15).

²⁸ Leah Whittington, 'Vergil's Nisus and the Language of Self-Sacrifice in *Paradise Lost*', *Modern Philology* 107 (2010), 558–606 (at 601).

²⁹ Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey, *Paradise Lost as 'Myth'* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 122–3. For the image of truth-as-Osiris, see *CPW* 2:549–51.

Jeremy Tambling argues that *Paradise Lost* does not work in a fashion ‘whereby the classical pagan prefigures the Christian. Milton refuses the consolations of symbolism, or rather mortifies them’.³⁰ The pagan, though, is not refused quite as neatly as Tambling suggests; the fact of the fable’s relation (albeit ‘erring’) by both the Ausonian people and the narrator provides the reader with, and invites speculation on, the typological elements of the narrative even as they are ultimately denied. As Raphael reveals, Messiah’s expulsion of the rebels from heaven (occurring later in the poem than the description of Mulciber’s fall, but before it in the narrative time-scheme) bears significant similarities to the Ausonian fable:

for he meant
 Not to destroy them, but root them out of heaven:
 The overthrown he raised, and as a herd
 Of goats or timorous flock together thronged
 Drove them before him thunderstruck, pursued
 With terrors and with furies to the bounds
 And crystal wall of heaven. (vi. 854–60)

Both Mulciber and the rebel angels are thrown from crystal walls by an angry deity; both falls are described primarily in terms of their length, since even though the satanic host falls for a longer time (‘Nine days they fell’ (vi. 871)), the fact of this lengthier fall is belied by the terse half-line of description, in contrast to the drawn-out, pastoral, description of the full, but single, day Mulciber falls; both falls involve fire in some sense, since Mulciber is ‘like a falling star’ (visible only after the ‘setting sun’), and the devils are ‘hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky’ (i. 45). The similarities in the descriptions of both falls reveal that the Ausonian mythologizers are essentially (re)telling a true story; they have grasped a fragment of truth, even if they do not understand it completely, or signify it correctly. The exclusivity of the narrator’s claim to divinely inspired truth is thus undermined by its relationship to another kind of fallen ‘truth’, the allegory which is a necessary part in the process of understanding.

Allegorical construction is itself revelatory of a dislocation between signifier and signified: ‘The more things and meanings disengage, the more obvious become the material operations of the allegories that fumble to reunite them.’³¹ By examining the ‘material operations’ of the competing allegory in *Paradise Lost*, we can observe the poem’s attempt to deploy fallen language in order to surpass it, in spite of the self-limiting futility of such a task.

The fractured and ambiguous nature that *Paradise Lost* is thus forced to adopt undermines any claim to an authorial integrity or internal cohesion. The aim of *Paradise Lost* may be to reproduce perfect song, yet to do so on

³⁰ Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 125–6.

³¹ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 19.

Earth, with its 'mixed choices', is to subject that perfect to imperfect understanding and expression; by attempting to place biblical truth within a post-lapsarian historical schema (with its attendant conditions of fallen knowledge expressed through fallen language), *Paradise Lost* actually articulates the very limits of that schema. In claiming that his poem is reality, what is instead revealed is the insufficient potential of that fractured reality to express perfect truth.

Thus, in *Paradise Lost*, the ruptures provide moments of indeterminacy. They are occasions on which the epic voice that claims to speak with the authority of the *logos* becomes subject to the fragmentary forces of fallen time, language and myth. The rupture reveals the faultline, which the narrative voice continuously attempts to close up, between fallen knowledge and the perfect language and comprehension of God, the heavenly muse, or narrating angels. Adam and Eve declare God 'unspeakable' (v. 156) even in their Edenic hymn; the epic voice displays the same incapacity to express God through its fractured, ambiguous language. *Paradise Lost* continuously evokes the Fall, serving as a traumatic reinscription of humanity's fall away from God. In its conceits, metaphors and at the level of language itself, the poem constantly undermines its own project of portraying divinity. *Paradise Lost* ultimately refers only to paradise inexpressible, the unreachable *logos* that can now be comprehended only as a fractured set of signifiers.

University of Kent

Abstract

LIAM D. HAYDON, *Ambiguous words: post-lapsarian language in Paradise Lost*

This article considers the differences between fallen and unfallen language in *Paradise Lost*. The poem presents divine language as perfect, intuitive and possessing a direct correlation between word and thing. The Falls of both Satan and mankind break that correlation, introducing multivalency, and the ability to dissimilate, into language. Satan rebels, in part, by emphasizing the open-ness of language in a series of puns and contestations over the proper naming of things. Conversely, although Adam and Eve both pun after the Fall, this is done almost unconsciously as a mark of, rather than exultation in, the Fall. *Paradise Lost*, too, is enmeshed in this fallen language; I argue that it self-consciously deploys the features of post-lapsarian language (puns, ambiguity, multivalency) in order to express the limits of its own expression, pointing to its own failure to reproduce sacred song. In *Paradise Lost*, the glorious achievement is not in overcoming this multivalence, but in expressing it at all. In doing so, it invites its fit audience to recognize the limits of their own language and understanding, and find in those very limits a renewed desire to strive towards the unattainable perfection that the poem seeks to fleetingly capture.

Keywords: Derrida; Milton; punning