

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: - (1989)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The devil in Milton
Autor: Forsyth, Neil
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870655>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 28.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE DEVIL IN MILTON*

Le Satan du *Paradis perdu* de John Milton (1608-1674), peut-être le personnage le plus déroutant de la littérature anglaise, a suscité polémiques et controverses. Le conférencier tâche de percer à jour les principales énigmes posées par cette figure aussi fascinante que terrifiante. Il affirme en effet que Satan est le véritable héros du poème, mais non — comme le croyait Shelley, poète romantique et révolutionnaire — à cause de ses qualités morales, mais bien parce que le diable incarne l'esprit séducteur qui préside à l'élaboration du poème dans son ensemble. Dans un premier temps, Satan est posé dans sa littéarité, plutôt qu'en tant que l'incarnation du mal; le conférencier rappelle toutefois que ce fut la croyance générale à l'époque de l'auteur, notamment quant à la présence diabolique sur scène et dans les rituels du sabbat. Sont abordés dans cette perspective, l'aspect sexuel du personnage, sous les espèces d'une morphologie serpentine, puis diverses «contaminations» entre Satan et la figure du Christ.

The subject of my lecture is the Satan of John Milton's great epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. He has been one of the most fertile — and also unsettling — characters in English literature. Fertile of interpretation, of response, of rewriting — and unsettling, even threatening, because so fascinating yet so hard to evaluate. He has become, in fact, as subversive for subsequent readers of Milton as was the devil of the popular and theological tradition. Some of the Romantic poets, like the young Shelley, thought him the prototype of revolutionary heroism, but more, perhaps most readers have felt compelled to demonstrate his moral flaws — as if the danger he represents needs constantly to be contained by every reader, at every reading. The poem, I think, encourages both these responses, in that it offers the reader an alluring and persuasive portrait of Satan but sets it within a structure which encourages, even requires, its rejection.¹ Today I shall concen-

* Leçon inaugurale prononcée le 8 juin 1988 à l'Université de Lausanne.

trate on some of the features of Milton's Satan that make him unsettling, both enticing and frightening.

Paradise Lost, as I expect you know, was written during and after the English Revolution. It retells the story of Adam and Eve, situating it within the Christian view of cosmic history, and so identifying the serpent of Genesis with Satan. I am today going to make five main points about this disturbing character. In each case I hope to show you how Milton opens the problem of evil not as a philosophical abstraction but as an experience — experience both outward and, as in the relation of fiction to deceit, more deeply inward.

1

The first point to grasp is that, even in the religious tradition, Satan is not simply the personification of evil (or its *incarnation* — to use a more suggestive term that Milton himself exploits). He was first, and really always remained, a character in a narrative — in fact in the myth of a combat between Christ and Satan which informs, or gives shape to, the Christian story of Fall and Redemption. The role of Satan in that narrative is to be the Opponent, the Adversary, the one who motivates the plot, who drives the story into motion. The idea that Christ, or God, is good and Satan evil, though very widespread, is not universal and is in any case secondary — it is an interpretation of the primary texts and traditions, which are narrative and which may reverse (or simply ignore) good and evil markers.² Characters are produced by the plot and function as the plot requires — evil comes later. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan in fact chooses “evil” — or is made to seem to do so — “Evil be thou my good” (IV 110), he says in famous words which suggest already a central difficulty of the interpretive tradition: good for what? we need to know: evil, but for whom? *Good* and *evil* pretend to be absolute terms, like Platonic ideas, aspiring to the status of nouns rather than adjectives — but in *Paradise Lost* it is Satan who first constitutes them as these absolutes, and we ought, perhaps, to be a little wary of taking Satan's word.

Prior to or apart from moral evaluation, then, the plot requires an angel who rebels against the terms of God's rule. The rebellion among the gods is a narrative paradigm that comes down from antiquity in various forms. Hesiod's has been an especially influential one, but I have argued elsewhere³ that Hesiod's

2

Milton's Satan corresponds partly to the figure of religious belief, but he is here, and this is a part of the problem, a character in an epic narrative. Now, like all "characters" in literature, of course, Satan is not really "there" — he is absent and only conjured into imagined presence by the reader's activity. Once we put it like that, though, we make available a fascinating but rather risky parallel between literature and magic, and the figure of the devil is one way to explore it. I want to raise this issue briefly in historical rather than theoretical terms — and this is my second point, the importance of the historical moment for Milton's Satan. Several stories circulated during the period about performances of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*: in one especially interesting case, "as Faustus was busy with his magical invocations," the cast of the play suddenly felt as if a mysterious other had joined them: "there was one devil too many."⁶ Everyone was so frightened that they called off the performance, went home quietly and spent the night in prayer — unusual behaviour for actors. This story suggests that theatre and religious ritual were still not entirely differentiated, at least in the popular mind. In fact, the right to conjure, to control the mystery by which literary and dramatic inventions can seem to be really present, was an important issue in the political struggles among church, court and parliament,⁷ just as the question of Christ's "real presence" during the Mass was very much at issue. It happened that the monarch exerted more and more direct control over the theatre, and when parliament took power from the king in 1642, beginning the Civil War, it closed the theatres.

So it was during Milton's lifetime that these issues were fought over and the modern view began to emerge of literature as a separate, secular practice, detached from social institutions and designed for aesthetic or reflective rather than moral or religious satisfaction. But this view was still contemporary with another, more traditional notion — the one that required as normal the censorship of literature because of its power to shape and challenge social consciousness. Milton's Satan clearly partakes of both worldviews — indeed this confrontation of ideologies is an important reason for his ambivalence. Milton treats Satan as an object of traditional religious belief — yet partly as a result of *Paradise Lost*, Satan became henceforward a literary character, to reappear in some of the best known plays, novels or romantic

poems of the European cultural heritage. The Satan Blake found in Milton, for example, is not a figure of religious belief but a source of poetic energy and imagination, indeed the one real source, and his opponents represent the repressive world that was coming to be with the industrial revolution — which forces the arts into that separate, marginalized status they have since taken on. And, to take a more general example, so compelling is the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost* that generations of Englishmen, knowing their Milton better than their Bible, have assumed that Christianity teaches an elaborate story about the fall of the angels after a war in heaven, and have been surprised to find no mention of Satan in the biblical Book of Genesis.

One can say, then, that Milton's Satan was invented at the last possible moment, at the very time when belief in the devil was in decline, undermined by the new forms of rationalism or liberal religion — or the excesses of the great witch-persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Is Hell a place or a psychological state, for example? In *Paradise Lost* it is both: Hell is there, indeed created by God — a serious problem, that — yet Milton's Satan, echoing Marlowe's Mephistopheles, also says in famous words "Myself am Hell." In Milton the two concepts coexist, but soon a literal hell would no longer be a respectable object of belief for the educated classes. Indeed in Milton's own theological treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, written at the same time as *Paradise Lost*, Satan rarely appears. There Milton is more interested in the symbolic aspect signalled by George Herbert when he wrote: "devils are our sins in perspective."

3

Nevertheless Milton was quite ready to exploit the diversity of images current in the period. On the face of it, perhaps, Milton's heroic, articulate and self-conscious devil is as far removed as possible from the furtive Satan of the witches, who lurked in forests and in the fertile imaginations of the torturers. But this version of Satan is suggested by some details in the text: he conceives his first rebellious plan at midnight, the witching hour, and it is a variant of the witches' Satan who is responsible for the seduction of Eve.

Take for example the episode of Eve's demonic dream. Satan has crept into the garden of Eden and found Eve sleeping beside Adam. "Squat like a toad" (a common form of the witches'

familiar) at Eve's ear Satan tries to distort "the organs of her fancy" with a dream. The content of the dream suggests, but does not make explicit, that it is the prototype of all those nocturnal experiences, whether dreamed or real, aspects of the witch-craze which burned throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which women rode or flew away to cavort in the forest with the devil, or the black man, or the evil one, as the main figure of these nocturnal excitements was variously called. *Paradise Lost* has been studied as an encyclopedic assemblage of many different, perhaps all literary genres,⁸ but one that often escapes notice is the confession of the witch trial — in historical cases often forced out by judicial torture and made to conform to the judges' preconceptions.⁹ Next morning Eve tells Adam about her dream; her account recalls the language of Renaissance love poetry, but it includes several elements common to the witch experiences, including the nocturnal summons, the sexual flattery and excitement, the plant or drug which gives special powers (in this case the tree itself), the appearance at the appointed place of the angelic and/or bestial Satan, and the ability to fly. "Methought" she says to Adam,

Close at mine ear one called me forth to walk
 With gentle voice, I thought it thine; it said,
 Why sleepest thou Eve? Now is the pleasant time,
 The cool, the silent, save where silence yields
 To the night-warbling bird, that now awake
 Tunes sweetest his love-laboured song; now reigns
 Full orb'd the Moon, and with more pleasing light
 Shadowy sets off the face of things; in vain,
 If none regard; Heaven wakes with all his eyes,
 Whom to behold but thee, Nature's desire,
 In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment
 Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze.
 I rose as at thy call, but found thee not;
 To find thee I directed then my walk;
 And on, methought, alone I passed through ways
 That brought me on a sudden to the Tree
 Of interdicted Knowledge: fair it seemed,
 Much fairer to my Fancy than by day:
 And as I wondering looked, beside it stood
 One shaped and winged like one of those from Heaven
 By us oft seen; his dewy locks distilled
 Ambrosia; on that Tree he also gazed;
 And O fair plant, said he, with fruit surcharged,

Deigns none to ease thy load and taste thy sweet,
Nor God, nor Man; is Knowledge so despised? (V 36-60)

Satan (who is this angelic figure) proceeds to anticipate the speech he will later make to Eve's waking self at the Tree when he convinces her to eat. Then, as Eve's dream-narrative continues,

So saying, he drew nigh, and to me held,
Even to my mouth of that same fruit held part
Which he had plucked; the pleasant savoury smell
So quickened appetite, that I, methought,
Could not but taste. Forthwith up to the clouds
With him I flew, and underneath beheld
The Earth outstretched immense, a prospect wide
And various: wond'ring at my flight and change
To this high exaltation; suddenly
My guide was gone, and I, methought, sunk down,
And fell asleep; but O how glad I waked
To find this but a dream!

Note first how the syntax — “could not but taste. Forthwith...” — manages to suppress the actual eating of the fruit, for this is but a dream, a sign of Eve's interest in the prohibited tree, perhaps, but not yet the terrible moment itself. She is still innocent here, and the idea of witchcraft is, of course, not made explicit.

If the typical account of witchcraft governs the structure and content of this speech at one end of the spectrum, as it were, we should not miss the implication, at the other end, that Satan's voice and his ability to induce a dream in Eve's consciousness aligns him, and not necessarily ironically, with the voice of God she had heard previously, and with Milton himself as poet: this triple alignment of God-poet-Satan as writers, so to put it, recurs in many forms in the poem, and threatens constantly to subvert any easy hierarchy we may wish to impose. Adam tries afterwards to sort out or interpret the implications of this dream for Eve (and himself), but as it happens, his argument only bears further witness to Satan's problematic place in the workings of the mind, of self-understanding, of subjectivity.

4

When Satan does lead Eve to the tree and induce her to eat, he does so not as angel but as serpent.¹⁰ Adam and Eve have been warned to beware of Satan — they have been told all about the

rebel's war in heaven, but they have not been told to look out for talking snakes. And yet it is in this disguise — and this is my fourth point — that Satan reaches his most fascinating and threatening. The serpent images of the poem include, most memorably, the lower half of the allegorical figure of Sin, born from Satan's head (like Athena from the head of Zeus): she

seemed Woman to the waist, and fair,
 But ended foul in many a scaly fold
 Voluminous and vast, a Serpent armed
 With mortal sting: about her middle round
 A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing barked
 With wide Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung
 A hideous peal: yet when they list would creep,
 If aught disturbed their noise, into her womb,
 And kennel there, yet there still barked and howled
 Within unseen. Far less abhorred than these
 Vexed Scylla bathing in the Sea that parts
 Calabria from the hoarse Trinacrian shore:
 Nor uglier follow the Night-Hag [Hecate], when called
 In secret, riding through the air she comes
 Lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance
 With Lapland witches, while the labouring moon
 Eclipses at their charms. (II 650-666)

Paradise Lost often extends itself geographically in this way, and the move here produces a typical overlapping of popular and mythological lore: the lines translate Ovid's description of Scylla (*Metamorphoses* XIV 40-74), and allude also to the common belief of the time, about which Milton was sceptical,¹¹ that Lapland was where witches came from. Especially in the idea of infant blood, the full horror of Satan's associations begin to show through. Milton also shows himself prepared to play on the sexual fears frequently associated with serpents. He knew in fact, that one of the principal threats posed by Satan was as a sexual interloper — although again this aspect has not often been stressed.

To illustrate this point let me tell you a story about the now well-known anthropologist Ruth Finnegan, author of important books such as *Oral Literature in Africa* or *Oral Poetry*. She did her initial fieldwork among the Limba people of Sierra Leone. She spent a lot of time collecting their traditions, especially their tales, for her thesis. One day they told her: Now it's your turn. We've told you lots of our stories, now you tell us one of yours. She protested briefly, but then chose to tell them the story of

Adam and Eve, more or less as it occurs in Genesis. They listened politely but made little comment at the time. Two years later she went back to Sierra Leone to continue collecting tales: one of the stories she now heard was called "Adamu and Ifu." It was about a clever snake who seduced Adamu's wife and took her to live with him in the bush. They started a family of their own and Adamu was very jealous. What the Limba had done was to adapt the story to fit perfectly into their own preoccupations, since many of their tales concern adulterous wives — apparently a source of much anxiety among the Limba.

I am not proposing any direct equation between the world of the Limba and seventeenth century England, although the comparative perspective might shift the way we read the divorce debates inspired by Milton's tracts, how we respond to the intensity of their language. No, this original adaptation, I suggest, shows what is, in fact, one of the potential meanings of the biblical myth, not developed at all in the Genesis version, but there nonetheless if we lean hard enough on the narrative. And in fact, the midrashic retellings of the Adam and Eve story by the rabbis had soon produced a version in which Eve was literally seduced by the serpent-figure, who thus became the father of Cain. The story is well known in the Jewish tradition, where the angel in this form is usually known as Sammael. It also lies behind at least one New Testament passage, a letter of John's which distinguishes "the children of god" from "the children of the devil... For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother" (I John 3, 11-12).

The story of Eve's seduction is not explicit in the biblical text, nor is it spelled out in *Paradise Lost*. But, I suggest, the reader can feel its pressure on the text. Satan's desire, for example, is clear in that remarkable cry when he catches sight of Adam and Eve making love in their garden:

Sight hateful, sight tormenting thus these two
 Imparadist in one another's arms
 The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
 Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust,
 Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
 Among our other torments not the least,
 Still unfulfilled with pain of longing pines. (IV 505-511)

This passage identifies love itself as what Satan really misses or as what Paradise really means. It makes Satan quite literally into the

archetypal voyeur, and gives as an immediate motive for the temptation of Eve sexual jealousy or frustration.¹²

The implications of Eve's seduction, which may be working at various levels of consciousness, are also an undercurrent in the marital quarrel of Adam and Eve before Eve goes off alone for her fatal encounter with Satan. It is part of the danger that readers know Eve to be in — but it is important also that the story is repressed, held *in potentia*: to spell it out would, of course, vulgarize the poem and destroy the delicacy and beauty of the tension between this latent content — known or sensed by Milton's readers — and the play of minds at the intellectual level of persuasion and resistance.

Look at the scene a little more closely. Satan is now in the form (or body) of the serpent, and he exploits this means of approach in two main ways which correspond to the two main aspects of the tension I am arguing for. In the first place he makes himself as sensually attractive a serpent as he can. He

toward Eve

Addressed his way, not with indented wave,
 Prone on the ground, as since, but on his rear,
 Circular base of rising folds, that towered
 Fold above fold a surging Maze, his Head
 Crested aloft, and Carbuncle his Eyes;
 With burnisht neck of verdant Gold, erect
 Amidst his circling Spires, that on the grass
 Floated redundant: pleasing was his shape,
 And lovely, never since of Serpent kind
 Lovelier. (IX 495-505)

Then follows a typical Miltonic list of classical references to sexual serpents, such as Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great, said to have been loved by Jupiter in the form of a snake, or the mother of Scipio Africanus, about whom a similar story was told.¹³

In the second place, the Satan-serpent speaks. Milton's treatment of this necessary theme is interesting in several ways. Earlier interpreters had tried to explain why Eve is not suspicious of a snake that speaks.¹⁴ Well, all the animals could talk before the Fall, ran one rabbinic line of thought, but this was not popular among the Church Fathers for lack of biblical evidence. In the Christian tradition, quite often, the devil occupied the serpent or spoke through his mouth rather in the way that demons might speak through a possessed man — one among many instances of

how the New Testament affected reading of the Old. Sir Thomas Browne, among others in the Renaissance, suggested that Eve might still be so new to life in Eden that she “might not yet be certain only man was privileged with speech” (*Pseudodoxia Epidemica* V. 4). Calvin, however, had suggested that, although Genesis doesn’t mention Eve’s surprise, no doubt she perceived it to be extraordinary — and “therefore she greedily received that whereat she wondered” (*Commentary on Genesis* III. 3).

Milton adopted Calvin’s version, as he often did, but with a clever variation. When she hears him address her, Eve asks:

What may this mean? Language of men pronounc’t
By Tongue of Brute, and human sense expressed?
The first at least of these I thought denied
To Beasts, whom God on their creation-day
Created mute to all articulate sound. (IX 553-557)

Satan manages to turn this surprise to his advantage. Eve asks him how he learned speech — and to do so she uses a new word in the English language — “How camst thou *speakeable* of mute?” (IX 563). Satan responds, with typical cunning, that he acquired the new power from eating the fruit of one of the trees hereabouts. Oh, she says, how interesting. Which one? Come, I’ll show you, says he. When they finally reach the tree, Eve says: “Serpent, we might have spared our coming hither, Fruitless to mee, though Fruit be here to excess” (647-648), — we are not allowed to eat just that particular tree, as it happens. So the serpent’s command of human language is, as Evans puts it, “the key to the whole temptation”. But Eve is already, because of Satan’s wily chat, in a state of frustrated expectation, ready to listen further to his words.

Eve has heard peculiar voices before, so we can understand her confusion: not only did Satan tempt her in a dream with a seductive speech, but her first experience of language was of a mysterious voice, warning her to turn away from her own image in the pool and seek him “whose image thou art”. The voice tells her, like the serpent’s, to “follow me”, and she comments: “what could I do, But follow straight, invisibly thus led?” (IV 467-476). The source of this voice is never explicitly identified in the poem, and the narrator is equally cagey about how the serpent speaks — “with serpent tongue Organic, or impulse of vocal Air” (IX 529-530). Indeed the biblical commentators frequently discussed the problem.

Eve says to Adam afterwards, he could not “have discerned Fraud in the serpent, speaking as he spake; No ground of enmitie between us known, Why he should mean me ill” (IX 1149-1152). This is a serious argument. Indeed it is Satan who teaches her to *discern*, as the course of the scene shows. True, he uses some of the weapons of magic, such as the tradition of forbidden knowledge — to tempt her — but notice how he puts it: the tree gives power, he claims, to “discern things in their causes” (IX 681-682). This impresses Eve — as her own musing confirms. Watch for the word “discern” in this passage:

In the day we eat
Of this Fair Fruit, our doom is, we shall die.
How dies the serpent? hee hath eat'n and lives,
And knows and speaks and reasons and discerns
Irrational till then. (IX 762-766)

So what has most impressed her — as this speech shows — is the serpent’s ability to develop rational arguments, in particular rational arguments about words, to *discern* or *discriminate* their meanings. *Dis* in fact was an ancient name for Pluto, Satan’s equivalent in Roman mythology, he is mentioned elsewhere in the poem as the “gloomy Dis” who carried off Persephone (IV 270), and Milton would feel the pun.¹⁵ God said, “In the day ye eat thereof ye shall surely die” — and by showing Eve he is not dead himself, though he has supposedly eaten it, Satan has got her to think about that text, to interpret and divide its meanings, to rewrite it.

So shall ye die perhaps, by putting off
Human, to put on gods, death to be wisht,
Though threatened, which no worse than this can bring.
(IX 713-715)

She now refers the power of the word to Satan rather than God — or reads God’s word as if it were Satan’s. I hope it will not seem like too gross a distortion of the profession I practice and am here to demonstrate (which I first wrote as *demon-start!*) for you today if I say that the Satan-serpent here shows himself to be the first literary critic, and quickly he teaches Eve to be one too.

5

In the course of this lecture, we have seen Satan successively aligned with the heroic rebel, the god of the witches, the lustful

voyeur and seductive snake. These overlapping images are disturbing enough, I suppose, but what we have just begun to explore is even more so, that Satan is implicated in the mysterious origins of voice, of language itself — and so in the production of the poem. Indeed he can, we have seen, take over the power of God's word. I now want to suggest as my fifth point that Milton deliberately exploits these parallels: like Eve, we risk confusing Satan and the Christ who is God's Word.

In one passage, for example, as Satan enters the sleeping serpent via the mouth, he shows himself to be quite self-conscious about his decision to descend the chain of being in this way:

O foul descent (he says) that I who erst contended
 With gods to sit the highest, am now constrained
 Into a beast, and mixed with bestial slime,
 This essence to incarnate and imbrute,
 That to the height of deity aspired. (IX 163-167)

Richard Bentley, an eighteenth century classical scholar and early editor of Milton, had the quaint theory that, like many classical texts handed down in manuscript, the text of *Paradise Lost* was hopelessly corrupt because Milton was blind and had not been able to read the proofs. So Bentley corrected the poem. In commenting on this passage, he complained about one word in particular — yes, the word *incarnate*. "Milton", he writes, "would not use thus the word *incarnate*; he knew a higher essence than seraphical was afterwards incarnated" (i.e. Christ). Bentley has been useful to many more recent commentators on Milton because he manages so often and so resolutely to miss the point. Here, of course, the parallel and contrast is being deliberately drawn between Christ and Satan — "incarnate" points the parallel, while "imbrute" a nonce word, points the contrast.

In fact Milton is also pointing another parallel here, since at the beginning of this same book, Book IX, he describes how the divine muse

deigns
 Her nightly visitation unimplored,
 And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires
 Easy my unpremeditated verse.

So Satan's new form as a snake is parallel to Christ's as man and also to the bemused poet. Here, perhaps, it is easy enough to tell the differences, but in certain other cases it is rather more difficult, and more is at stake.

Paradise Lost opens with an invocation in which Milton aligns himself with Moses, and which invites the spirit who “from the first was present”, who “Dove-like satst brooding on the vast abyss And madst it pregnant” to preside now over the creation of the poem as once over the writing of Genesis and the creation it records. The unnamed spirit of the creation becomes explicitly Christ in Book VII, where the creation is imagined in some detail. As the voice of God, Christ performs the creative act, and Milton thus exploits the standard Christian parallel between poem and world, but this creation is actually a suppression of other voices:

Silence, ye troubled waves, and thou deep, peace,
Said then th’ omnific word, your discord end. (VII 216-217)

The silencing of others’ noise alludes to the Neptune of *Æneid* I, whose rising above the storm is compared in a famous simile to a powerful politician silencing the turbulent mob. Fowler’s note on the passage compares Death’s Neptune role (“As with a trident smote” X 295) in the building of the highway over Chaos from Hell to Earth after the Fall. And just as we find the power of Sin and Death in that passage, “Hovering upon the waters”, so the creating Spirit of God has “brooding wings” (VII 235) to “outspread” on “the watery calm” and to act on “the fluid mass” of chaos. The language obviously echoes the invocation to the whole poem, but it also recalls Milton’s description of himself, at the beginning of the same book, as following the voice divine “Above the flight of Pegasean wing”, upon “this fiery steed unreined, as once Bellerophon, though from a lower clime” and he begs to be let down gently lest “on the Aleian field I fall Erroneous there to wander and forlorn”. The analogy here is not only with the classical story of Pegasus, but with the winged and flying Satan of earlier in the poem. So always, and by Milton’s own hand, not Romantic poets like Blake or Shelley, the parallel between Christ and poet is tempered, threatened, undermined, by the analogy with Satan. And the poem, as part of its own potential subversion, projects this analogy as one to be feared not desired.¹⁶ A series of parallels, for example, links the two “hymns” that open Books III and IV, one to Light, the other to the sun, one by Milton, the other by Satan, and the similarities threaten to disappear in identity: this makes it especially interesting that the first question Milton asks of “Holy Light” is “May I express thee unblamed?” (III 3)

Let me give one more example of this unsettling doubling of Christ and Satan, this time from the shorter epic poem about the Redemption, *Paradise Regained*. The key moment in the kind of narrative we call romance comes when the hero unhelmets his enemy and discovers himself. As Fredric Jameson described it, “Romance in its original strong form may be understood as an imaginary ‘solution’ to the perplexing question of how my enemy can be thought of as being *evil* (that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute difference)”, when in fact he shares my ideals of conduct — points of honour, challenges, tests of strength — and reflects me as in a mirror.¹⁷ Not only romance, I would want to add, but all narratives — certainly these mythic Miltonic ones — approach this state of suspension between their deep and their surface structures. One of the best examples in Milton comes at the climax of *Paradise Regained*, when Satan and Christ are perched together on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. Christ’s enigmatic response to Satan’s final challenge, “Tempt not the Lord thy God”, makes Satan fall, smitten with amazement. The difference between the two seems finally clear, and yet just at this moment the two become one, in a pronoun.

So Satan fell; and straight a fiery Globe
Of Angels on full sail of wing flew nigh,
Who on their plummy vans received him soft
From his uneasy station. (*PR* IV 581-584)

Generations of readers have had to go back at that point to realize that Christ rather than Satan must be the referent of the pronoun,¹⁸ as the rest of the narrative continues to describe how these angels set him down in “a flowery valley on a green bank” and serve him a meal of celestial food divine. But just for a moment, the dark secret was out, that hero and enemy are one and the same, good and bad father, good and bad son. In *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve listen

With admiration and deep muse to hear
Of things so high and strange, things to thir thought
So unimaginable as hate in Heaven,
And War so near the seat of God in bliss
With such confusion. (*PL* VII 52-56)

Our reaction to the momentary identification of Satan with Christ at the end of *Paradise Regained* is likely to be similar — and certainly that difficult pronoun *him*, inhabited by both Christ and

Satan, is a measure of how far Milton's language was capable of going to find out what was threatening and subversive in his devil.

Did Milton know that according to an ancient Gnostic tradition, Christ, not Satan, was the serpent of Genesis, the bringer of Gnosis or spiritual knowledge?¹⁹ Or did he simply exploit the ambiguities of the traditional equations? The Gnostics were, in many ways, the most sophisticated readers of scripture in the ancient world, steadily finding the hidden meaning beneath the surface text, and Milton was certainly capable of taking the same route to his beliefs. Christ as the "general serpent" (one form of the Gnostic belief) could be reinforced by the recommendation Christ makes in the gospel saying (logion): "Be ye wise as serpents, and gentle as doves" (Matthew 10,16). If Milton knew the Gnostic tradition, he also knew, as a reader of Irenaeus on heresies, that the church had repressed it. Indeed Irenaeus, writing to combat the rival Gnostic readings of scripture, even gives his own version of the gospel saying, carefully separating the serpent from the dove: "Then was the sin of the first-formed man healed by the virtue of the First-Begotten (Christ), the wisdom of the serpent was conquered by the simplicity of the dove, and the chains were broken by which we were in bondage to death."²⁰ Thus did the struggle with rival interpretations produce the sharp oppositions of orthodoxy. Milton, then, I am suggesting, takes from both sides, reactivating the Gnostic reading of the tradition, but holding it within his poems; so he allowed it to work, like the witch beliefs and the sexuality of the serpent, beneath the surface of his narrative in those subversive ways I have tried to demon-start for you today.

Neil FORSYTH.

NOTES

¹ See Stanley Fish, *Surprised By Sin* (New York and London 1967), and my "The Structures of *Paradise Lost*", SPELL 3 (Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature), ed. Udo Fries (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987), pp. 159-176. Since this lecture was delivered, I have read with pleasure Kenneth Gross, "Satan and the Romantic Satan: a Notebook", in *Re-membering Milton*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (London: Methuen, 1988): some points of overlap with this article are indicated in subsequent footnotes.

² See Paul Ricœur, *Le mal: un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1986), which shows a change of position on this issue from *La Symbolique du Mal (Finitude et Culpabilité)*, vol. 2; Paris, Aubier Montaigne 1960).

³ *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton University Press: 1987), pp. 85-89.

⁴ See Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, Faber and Faber, 1977).

⁵ A good discussion is W.B. Hunter, "Milton on the Exaltation of the Son", in *Bright Essence* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1973).

⁶ See E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford University Press, 1923), vol. 3, p. 424.

⁷ I am thinking here of C.L. Barber, but particularly of Stephen Greenblatt's argument in "Shakespeare and the Exorcists", recently incorporated into his book *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁸ See for example Barbara Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁹ Carlo Ginzburg's recent *I Benandanti* (Eng. tr. *The Night Battles*) shows how the connection grew in the judges' mind between witchcraft and heresy, annulling any distinction between white and black magic. For the connection of sexuality and witchcraft, see R.E.L. Masters, *Eros and Evil* (New York, Julian Press, 1962; Baltimore, Penguin, 1974). As Keith Thomas shows in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973), pp. 616-628, the women were mostly poor, desperate and excluded. See generally George L. Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases 1648-1706* (New York, Scribner's, 1914, repr. 1959).

¹⁰ Genesis requires this, but the interpretive tradition had made it much more problematic: see for example the Greek version of "The Adam Book", known as the *Apocalypse of Moses*, and discussed in J.M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 57, and in my *The Old Enemy*, p. 233. Note also the new English version in the second volume of J.H. Charlesworth's *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983-1986). The text seems uncertain whether Satan is serpent or angel.

¹¹ See Merritt Y. Hughes's note *ad loc.*, citing Milton's *Muscovia*, Columbia edition, X 361.

¹² Kenneth Gross reminds us here of C.S. Lewis's memorable description of Satan as degraded to "a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows", but suggests that it is Lewis's eye, not Satan's which has here converted the sacred bower into "a bourgeois bedroom or bathroom" (*Re-membering*, p. 324).

¹³ The story is a serpentine variant of the widespread theme or type-scene in which the hero's parentage is part divine — what would otherwise be seen as an ordinary act of adultery. The same anxiety about origins, as well as more obvious sexual jealousy, is present, for example, in the variant told about Noah in the *Genesis Apocryphon*, one of the texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Lamech, Noah's father, is suspicious, believing that his baby boy could not glow

so much if he were not of angelic parentage. The suspicion leads to a long and emotional scene in which Lamech denounces his wife for infidelity with one of those cursed Watcher angels, causes of the Fall in this widespread Jewish tradition, and so parallel with the Satan figure in Milton. Lamech tries to get her to confess, but she swears that the seed was planted by Lamech and no Watcher angel or Son of Heaven. Unconvinced, Lamech gets his father, Methusaleh, to go and have a word with his father, Enoch, who by this time dwells with angels. Enoch is able to reassure him. See further in *The Old Enemy*, p. 214. Joseph makes a similar complaint about Mary in the apocryphal *Gospel of James*.

¹⁴ For this argument, and the quotations that follow, see J.M. Evans, *Genesis Tradition*, p. 275-276.

¹⁵ See my "Of Man's First Dis", forthcoming in *Milton and Italy*, proceedings of the Third International Milton Symposium, to be published by MRTS Press, Binghamton.

¹⁶ On this whole subject see William Riggs, *The Christian Poet in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 15-45, and William Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), pp. 184-187, who argues in psychological terms for Milton's fear that his devil will be only "a self-portrait drawn in perfect likeness to the hidden image of himself".

¹⁷ *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1981), p. 118.

¹⁸ For further discussion see William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 90.

¹⁹ See the *Testimony of Truth* 47.4-49.9 in Robinson, James T., ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp. 411-412; Michael E. Stone, ed. *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), p. 457.

²⁰ *Adversus Haereses* 5.19.1: further discussion in *The Old Enemy*, pp. 345-346.

N. F.