

THE GRAMMAR OF ETHICS IN *PARADISE LOST*

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, DC
April 15, 2015

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ABSTRACT

A current divide exists in Milton criticism between those who view *Paradise Lost* as an indeterminate work composed of irresolvable choices and *aporias* (contradictions), and those who view the poem as a singular work of moral certainty. I propose that a way beyond the two opposed interpretive positions lies in what I call the poem's "grammar of ethics," a set of generative rules underlying the ethical claims of the poem. The argument that I make for a grammar of ethics relies for its conceptual framework on the early linguistic work of Noam Chomsky, whose theory of generative grammar provides a helpful analogy to understanding the complex way in which *Paradise Lost's* moral and narrative structure works. Just as the innate rules and principles of generative grammar allow humans to create an infinite number of sentences out of limited means, I contend that an innate *moral* grammar underlies *Paradise Lost's* narrative structure, which allows the reader to generate her own ethical position. In addition to Chomsky's work, I draw on recent scholarship in moral cognition to make the connection between language and morals.

After establishing the scope of the grammar of ethics and its grammatical rules, I illustrate how the moral grammar functions in the poem. I specifically look at Milton's treatment of two key concepts in *Paradise Lost*, despair and heroism, and provide close readings of both concepts. In doing so, I distinguish between grammatical and

ungrammatical responses to the poem while suggesting ways that the reader generates innumerable ethical readings that move beyond the current polarization in Milton Studies.

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Introduction: The Grammar of Ethics

“First they should begin with the chief and necessary rules of some good Grammar.”
-Milton, *Of Education*, 1644¹

“I fear we are not getting rid of God, because we still believe in grammar.”
-Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1889

Paradise Lost divides its modern readers. For the past several decades there has been a fierce debate—the first major debate of the twenty-first century—over how to interpret the poem.² As the debate stands today, two critical camps vie for interpretive control of the poem: the “aporetic” critics (commonly self-identified as “The New Milton Critics”) who argue for the poem’s ambiguous and indeterminate nature, and the orthodox critics who hold that the poem expresses a singular, unified moral vision of the world and our place in it.³ Peter Herman, Joseph Wittreich, and Michael Bryson, to name just a few of the New Milton Critics, see Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, as a poet of open-endedness, a poet who never completely affirms one position but rather perpetually undoes, like Penelope awaiting the return of Odysseus, what he has just woven. Stanley Fish, Dennis Danielson, and Susanne Woods (among others), oppose this view, and in doing so claim allegiance to a much longer critical heritage that views Milton as a poet deeply committed to a set of values, which he worked out for himself on the major political and religious issues of his

¹ CPW 2.382. All references (volume and page number) to Milton’s prose are from *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton* unless otherwise noted. All references to Milton’s poetry are from Merritt Y. Hughes’ *Complete Poems and Major Prose*.

² The two twentieth century debates that defined much critical discourse on the poem were the God/Satan debate (Waldock, Lewis, Empson et al) of the ’40s – ’60s, and the debate over Milton’s style (F. R. Leavis and Christopher Ricks). Many critics suggest that Stanley Fish ended the God/Satan debate in the late ’60s with the publication of *Surprised By Sin*, but in reaction to Fish’s powerful influence and the rise of historically and culturally informed criticism, a new group of critics opposed Fish’s reading. Milton criticism today largely works within this critical climate.

³ I use the epithet “aporetic” to identify a salient feature of the New Milton Critics’ approach to Milton. While there are other attributes and concerns that loosely align the group, aporia and indeterminacy seem to be the critical concerns that separate them most strongly from the traditional/orthodox critics, who value Milton’s deliberate and determinate enterprise.

day. Both positions have become entrenched enough to inform two recent essay collections, *The New Milton Criticism* (2012) and *Milton's Rival Hermeneutics: "Reason is But Choosing"* (2012), which provide, however, much "to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate" (CPW 2.512-513).

The following study attempts to move beyond the opposed interpretive positions by formulating what I call *Paradise Lost's* "grammar of ethics," a set of generative rules underlying the ethical claims of the poem. The argument that I make for a grammar of ethics relies for its conceptual framework on the early linguistic work of Noam Chomsky, whose theory of generative grammar provides a helpful analogy to understanding the complex way in which *Paradise Lost's* moral and narrative structure works.⁴ Just as the innate rules and principles of generative grammar allow humans to create an infinite number of sentences out of limited means, I contend that an innate *moral* grammar underlies *Paradise Lost's* narrative structure, which allows the reader to generate her own ethical position. The central component of Chomsky's theory of grammar—what Chomsky identifies as the "essential and defining characteristic of human language"—consists in its *generative* (from the Latin *generâre*: to beget, to produce) capacity, which he appropriates from Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of creative language use (*Cartesian Linguistics* 69). This generative feature of grammar bears significantly on the fundamental creative impulse behind *Paradise Lost's* grammar of ethics, a feature that distinguishes it from other Renaissance ethical works such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Generative grammar, however, as the following argument bears out, differs from the traditional

⁴ See *Syntactic Structures* (2002), *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (2009), and *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* (1965).

understanding of grammar as the rules of language and parts of speech, an understanding of grammar that dates back to the medieval *trivium* (i.e., grammar, rhetoric, and logic).⁵

Since some readers might question the analogical application of grammar to an analysis of *Paradise Lost*, specifically to an analysis of its moral argument, I want to clearly define my project, which falls under what is a relatively new field of study, “cognitive poetics,” a field closely aligned with stylistics.⁶ Cognitive poetics, which was coined by the Romanian theorist Reuven Tsur in 1977 (*A Perception-oriented Theory of Metre*), refers to an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature that combines psychology, cognitive linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory. According to Tsur, “[cognitive poetics] offers cognitive theories that systematically account for the relationship between the structure of literary texts and their perceived effects. By the same token, it discriminates which reported effects may legitimately be related to the structures in question, and which may not (1). Cognitive poetics, in other words, negotiates between the text’s “structure and the reader’s mental processes,” specifically the text’s perceived effects or “qualities,” and attempts to explain why the reader has certain experiences of the text:

⁵ See Sister Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*. As one of the “three roads” (*tri*/three – *via*/way) to order, describe, and define objects and/or information, early grammarians naturally linked grammar with logic (dialectic) and rhetoric as an expressive component of the mind (as opposed to the *quadrivium*, which pertained to matter). Although it falls under one of the seven liberal arts (i.e., thinking skills/practices), grammar—in the medieval and Renaissance sense—focused on the acquisition and mastery of language rules (syntax, parts of speech, tense, voice, etc.), and not on how those rules might generate new utterances (for example, in medieval manuscripts illustrations, the commonly personified portrait of grammar depicted a teacher in front of young students, each of whose head is bent in a downward direction, diligently working at a tablet). The origin of grammar as an account of language rules and as a “pillar of education” goes back to third century BCE Greece (i.e., Chrysippus of Soli). As a full-fledged linguistic science, however, grammar begins in the early Middle Ages with the creation of the liberal arts. cf. Andreas U. Schmidhauser, “The Birth of Grammar in Greece.”

⁶ Both cognitive poetics and stylistics derive much of their theoretical tools from Russian Formalism, an early twentieth century movement that paid close attention to the “literariness” and structural features of texts. Stockwell (2002) notes that the practitioners of cognitive poetics and stylistics, however, are mainly English and Northern European scholars, which partially explains its lack of popularity as a critical practice in the United States.

It should be noted that the effects of poetic texts are not perceived in a way in which the effects of, say, touching an electric wire are perceived. The latter are perceived on mere exposure to the wires, whereas the former presupposes a certain kind of cooperation on the perceiver's part [. . .] Perceived qualities of texts only arise when they are performed in certain ways, that is, when the reader discriminates certain elements and realizes certain relationships between them. (Tsur 29)

Cognitive poetics, as Peter Stockwell argues, provides an ideal approach to discriminating such patterns, since it accounts for how the reader engages with the patterns (both consciously and subconsciously) and their effect on her. But, more importantly for the following study, which identifies the moral grammar of *Paradise Lost* as a perceived pattern, cognitive poetics describes how the reader turns “intuitive interpretations into expressible meanings”:

The process of engaging in cognitive poetic analysis offers a raised awareness of certain patterns that might have been subconscious or not even noticed at all. Cognitive poetics in this view has a productive power in at least suggesting a new interpretation [. . .] Cognitive poetics models the process by which intuitive interpretations are formed into expressible meanings, and it presents the same framework as a means of describing and accounting for those readings. (Stockwell 7-8)

Cognitive poetics thus provides a rich account of how readers process and experience texts, in particular literary texts, and how they express (account for) their readings of such texts. I depart, however, from Tsur and Stockwell's rather wide interdisciplinary approach to cognitive poetics by isolating and focusing on linguistics as my conceptual framework. By engaging grammar as a conceptual analogy, I am able to draw on the considerable amount of recent scholarship in moral cognition, which affords me the opportunity to make the important connection between language and morals. Linguistics, moreover, allows me to move beyond simply identifying the grammar of ethics (the

perceived pattern) to illustrating how it contributes to what Tsur calls the text's "human significance," which in the case of *Paradise Lost* is its ethical argument (4).

Ever since John Rawls made the rather casual connection between language and morals in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), numerous scholars have followed in his wake that have attempted to expand and deepen his insight.⁷ Marc Hauser, one of the most vocal and controversial scholars working in the field of cognitive science, calls his project to describe the "unconscious and inaccessible principles that are operative in our moral judgments," a "descriptive theory of morality," a theory that does not prescribe what one ought to do (normative ethics) but simply describes the process (a theory) of how we come to make moral decisions. For Hauser, "moral judgments are mediated by an unconscious process, a hidden moral grammar that evaluates the causes and consequences of our actions and others' actions (2). The cause or origin of moral judgment for those relying on the linguistic analogy lies in the innate moral principles of the human brain. In other words, something innate in humans allows us to morally reason, providing us with a *sense* of what is right and wrong, which is independent of instruction, guidance, or culture. Hauser, following Rawls, calls it a moral grammar: "At the basic level, there must be some innate capacity that allows each child to build a

⁷ "A useful comparison here is with the problem of describing the sense of grammaticalness that we have for sentences of our native language. In this case the aim is to characterize the ability to recognize well-formed sentences by formulating clearly expressed principles which make the same discriminations as the native speaker. This is a difficult undertaking which, although still unfinished, is known to require theoretical constructions that far outrun the ad hoc precepts of our explicit grammatical knowledge. A singular similar situation presumably holds in moral philosophy. There is no reason to assume that our sense of justice can be adequately characterized by familiar common precepts, or derived from the more obvious learning principles. A correct account of moral capacities will certainly involve principles and theoretical constructions which go much beyond the norms and standards cited in everyday life; it may eventually require fairly sophisticated mathematics as well. This is to be expected, since on the contract view the theory of justice is part of the theory of rational choice. Thus the idea of the original position is an agreement on principles there does not seem too complicated or unnecessary. Indeed, these notions are rather simple and can serve only as a beginning" (Rawls 47).

specific moral grammar, No other species that we know of constructs elaborate moral systems. Something about human brains enables this construction generation after generation” (Hauser 49).

Moral philosopher and legal scholar John Mikhail takes Rawls’ linguistic analogy to its logical conclusion, arguing that the “future of moral philosophy rests squarely within the cognitive and brain sciences” (11). Mikhail, however, suggests that the linguistic analogy is nothing new, and that it has “exercised the imagination not only of philosophers, but also of a wide range of scientists and scholars, including anthropologists, biologists, economists, linguists, psychologists, political scientists, and lawyers” (8-9). Mikhail’s project, which draws on scholarship that goes back to Grotius, attempts “to develop a scientific research program in moral psychology that uses thought experiments such as the trolley problem and other cases of necessity, and a Socratic, case-based method more generally, to investigate the nature and origin of human moral intuitions” (42). Mikhail, like Rawls, Hauser and Robert Nozick, suggests that thinking about morality along the lines of linguistics allows for the same kind of change and adaptation in judgments, a “revisability of considered judgments,” which Rawls notes is not peculiar to moral philosophy, but is a ‘common feature of ethics, linguistics, the philosophy of intuition, and other disciplines devoted to [. . .] ‘the study of principles which govern actions shaped by self-examination’” (55-56).

I take a similar approach in linking linguistic and morality but instead turn to a literary work to study the principles of moral action. Like Hauser’s project in *Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong*, I see my attention to the moral grammar underlying *Paradise Lost* as a descriptive and not normative project; it is a reading that

describes, analogically, what I see occurring both at the structural and narrative level of the poem, but does not prescribe the moral position and/or reading one should take. Instead, I focus on what distinguishes *Paradise Lost's* grammar of ethics from other ethical works of the early modern period, its generative quality, or the quality that affords the reader a considerable amount of interpretive freedom. This freedom provides not only the opportunity for reasoned ethical deliberation, but also for a wealth of interpretations, which I hope will suggest a step beyond what I see as a division in Milton studies.

In *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (1966), Chomsky succinctly states the central relationship between creativity and grammar in his discussion of Humboldt's theory of creative language use:

The domain of language is infinite and boundless, 'the essence of all that can be thought' []. Consequently, the fundamental property of a language must be its capacity to use its finitely specifiable mechanisms for an unbounded and unpredictable set of contingencies. 'It must therefore make infinite use of finite means, and is able to do so through the productive power that is the identity of language and thought' []. (70)

The "finitely specifiable mechanisms," according to the following argument, are the grammatical rules of the poem, and the "unbounded and unpredictable set of contingencies," the varying ethical positions generated by the reader. A grammar of ethics, unlike a conventional ethical exercise or program composed to guide the reader's moral education from point to point, argument to argument, generates "unprecedented [ethical] combinations," not "preassembled clichés"; it is a productive activity rather than "a lifeless product," which provides the "means for the unbounded set of individual 'creative acts'" (*Cartesian Linguistics* 69-71). As Stanley Fish suggests by one of his chapters titles in *Surprised By Sin* (1967), which he draws from Milton's prose, the poem is "not so much a teaching, as an intangling" (*CPW* 2.642), a "mental labour" wherein the

reader struggles to generate an ethics (*Cartesian Linguistics* 70). The key to *Paradise Lost*'s grammar of ethics lies in the reader's productive power to create new and individual, though permissible (grammatical), ethical claims from the poem's finite rules. Hauser explains this process of generating moral judgments from discrete innate principles with characteristic clarity and élan (I quote in full so that the connection between language and morals becomes clear):

The language faculty takes as input discrete elements that can be combined and recombined to create an infinite variety of meaningful expressions: phonemes ("distinctive features" []) for individuals who can hear, signs for those who are deaf. When a phoneme is combined with another it creates a syllable. When syllables are combined, they create words. When words are combined, they create *The Iliad*, *The Origin of Species*, and *Mad* magazine. Actions appear to live in a parallel hierarchical universe. Like phonemes, many actions lack meaning. When combined, actions are meaningful. Like phonemes, when actions are combined, they do not blend; individual actions maintain their integrity. When actions are combined, they can represent an agent's goals, his means, and the consequences of his action or the omission of an action. When a series of subgoals are combined, they create events, including the *Nutcracker* ballet, the World Series, of the American Civil War. This ability suggests that morality is based on a system of general principles or rules, and not a list of specific examples.

By breaking down the principle into components, we achieve a second parallel with language. To attain its limitless range of expressive power, the principles of our moral faculty must take a finite set of elements and recombine them into new, meaningful expressions or principles. For language, we combine words and higher-order combinations of these words (noun and verb phrases). For morality, we recombine actions, their cause and consequences. (47-48)

The same combining of words to create new utterances based on innate principles that Hauser (and others) sees as the analogical basis for how we form moral judgments, I see informing the argument of *Paradise Lost*. The poem contains a moral pattern, what I am calling a grammar, which underlies and embodies the choices and actions of the characters. The moral grammar is therefore part of the narrative's texture, its fiber so to speak. As J. Hillis Miller argues, "Ethics and narration cannot be kept separate [. . .] Without storytelling there is no theory of ethics [. . .] The thematic dramatizations of

ethical topics in narratives are the oblique allegorization of this linguistic necessity” (3). But, as Chomsky suggests in applying the term “generative” to language activity, the core feature of a grammar lies in the productive capacity of the individual, and in the case of *Paradise Lost*, the reader, who holds these actions, consequences, and choices in her head, recombining them, judging them, or dismissing them. The reader, in other words, engages with the moral grammar of the poem to generate her own ethical judgments.

The poem, therefore, intentionally explores areas of moral complexity, employing—as part of its grammar—alternative claims to test the validity of the reader’s position.⁸ Such alternatives constitute what Bernard Williams calls “thought experiments for ethics,” where “once a certain degree of ambiguity is reached, *fiction* will come to do things direct statement cannot do, and working through the fiction will itself represent an extension of ethical thought” (54-55). The poem’s grammar, unlike most philosophical treatises, offers the reader an ethical experience rather than a fixed architecture of principles, aims, or goods.⁹

In what follows I examine two examples or “manifestations” of *Paradise Lost*’s grammar of ethics: despair and heroism (Chapters 3 and 4 respectively). In the poem’s treatment of both examples, a set of grammatical rules is in play. The following rules, while not exhaustive in covering every aspect of the poem’s moral grammar, are nevertheless necessary, since they represent the salient moral grammar that the reader must negotiate. Alteration and emendation of the rules is possible, and in many ways this

⁸ See Shore (60) and Woods (233, n. 2) on Milton’s “counterfactual imagination.”

⁹ See also Deigh, “Nussbaum’s Defense of the Stoic Theory of Emotions”: “By engaging our moral imagination and practical thought in ways that standard philosophical work does not, [fiction] discloses complexities of human life and its concrete problems that the abstract methods of moral philosophy, focused as they often are on finding universal and necessary truths, are ill-suited to illuminate” (293).

study invites additional exploration of the grammar of ethics, but the following cannot be denied as central to narrative.

Grammatical Rules (there is no hierarchical order or value to the rules):

1. *Multiplicity*: A moral perspective must be challenged by multiple other perspectives
2. *Contrariety*: A moral perspective becomes valid only by trial by that which is contrary
3. *Choice*: The reader must choose between multiple contrary moral perspectives
4. *Incertitude*: A moment of moral uncertainty is necessary to choosing a moral perspective
5. *Exposure*: Moral confrontation may take place within the safety afforded by fiction
6. *Allusion*: A moral perspective must achieve validity by subsuming and incorporating, rather than simply discrediting, previous perspectives
7. *Defamiliarization*: A defamiliarizing of a moral perspective enables the reader to make moral choices with less bias or prejudice

The grammar of ethics embodies these claims not only as rules but also (and more importantly) as a procedure (i.e., process) that comes to have ethical import and value only *by reading the poem*. They are empty and meaningless as rules in themselves and must be understood in the context of action and performance. In other words, a grammar of ethics generates an infinite number of ethical positions from the limited number of rules, but does not to take the rules as an “ethics” in themselves.¹⁰ Although *Paradise Lost* addresses, sometimes rather pedantically, the importance of obedience to the good life and how it is we come to have knowledge of good and evil, the poem nevertheless

¹⁰ The rules “express structural relations among the sentences of the corpus and the indefinite number of sentences generated by the grammar beyond the corpus (predictions)” (*Syntactic Structures* 49).

stresses process over prescription, and suggests, through the grammar of ethics, the importance of choice to such a enterprise.

Chapter 1: Grammatical vs. Ungrammatical Readings

Before turning to an analysis of how the grammar of ethics works in *Paradise Lost*, I want to make an important distinction between grammatical and ungrammatical readings of the poem, a distinction to which I *do not* attach correctness. (What I call grammatical readings are not “correct” readings and ungrammatical readings “incorrect.”) An ungrammatical response to the poem simply reads the poem without attending to its moral grammar. In fact, I applaud many ungrammatical readings, some of which are the strongest readings of the poem we have. Ungrammatical readings can be thought of as important readings, readings that significantly contribute to the multiplicity of interpretation, but readings that stand outside of the grammar of ethics (I briefly discuss Michael Bryson’s reading as an example of this below). Ungrammatical readings, in other words, tend to be readings of *Paradise Lost* that impose their own theory or interpretation on the poem. They tend not to address nor embrace the complex pattern that Milton foregrounds in the moral grammar. By failing to be disinterested, ungrammatical readings, moreover, ignore the generative quality of the poem, a quality that constitutes a significant part of the poem’s originality. Suffice it to say, ungrammatical readings play an important role in the interpretation of the poem, but do so without engaging with the moral grammar.

Linguists determine whether a sentence is “well-formed (grammatical), marginally well-formed, or ill-formed (unacceptable or ungrammatical)” by using an experiment called the *grammaticality judgment task* (GJT), which asks a native speaker to judge the correctness of a sentence (Carnie 14). For example, the sentence, “Colorless

green ideas sleep furiously,” may sound odd (semantically, at least) to a native speaker, but he or she will nevertheless identify it as grammatical construction, whereas, “Furiously sleep ideas green colorless,” would not only sound odd but also ill-formed and therefore ungrammatical to a native speaker.¹¹ A sentence of the latter sort would not only raise a native speaker’s ears if spoken aloud, but also lead him or her to question the speaker’s competence (i.e., knowledge of the language). Analogously, a reading of *Paradise Lost* that takes Satan to be the hero of the poem would be an ungrammatical response to the poem. Except for the few maverick readers who might want to rile up the interpretive community, no grammatical reader would take Satan to be the hero of the poem, especially since such a reading ignores the rules of multiplicity, contrariety, and defamiliarization, each of which interrogates the notion of heroism.¹² In order to illustrate how the grammar of ethics works in this instance, let us briefly look at two speeches, one by Satan and another by Eve, which highlight Milton’s treatment of heroic virtue, a feature of the poem that will be the focus of Chapter 4:

Long is the way
 And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light;
 Our prison strong, this huge convex of fire,
 Outrageous to devour, immures us around
 Ninefold, and gates of burning Adamant
 Barr’d over us prohibit all egress.
 These passed, if any pass, the void profound
 Of unessential Night receives him next
 Wide gaping, and with utter loss of being
 Threatens him, plung’d in that abortive gulf.

¹¹ Chomsky uses this example to “suggest that any search for a semantically based definition of ‘grammaticalness’ will be futile” (*Syntactic Structures* 15).

¹² Although I do not want to dwell on this point, I feel it needs to be addressed since its sway over Milton studies remains powerful. The “Devil’s party” or the “Satanists,” beginning with John Dryden’s comment, “*Paradise Lost* would have been properly heroic, if the devil had not been its hero,” and moving through Blake and Shelley to Waldock and Empson, impose their *own* feelings/beliefs on the poem. They do not read the poem as the poem presents itself, i.e., as a complex grammar that requires creative engagement on the reader’s part. They succumb, as I make clear below, to the rhetorical and emotional power of Satan, and thus fail to understand the intentional defamiliarization.

...

But I should ill become this Throne, O Peers,
And this imperial Sov'ranty, adorn'd
With splendour, arm'd with power, if aught propos'd
And judg'd of public moment, in the shape
Of difficulty and danger could deter
Mee from tempting. Wherefore do I assume
These royalties, and not refuse to reign,
Refusing to accept as great a share
Of hazard as of honor, due alike
To him who reigns.

(2.432-454)

And Eve:

If this be our condition, thus to dwell
In narrow circuit strait'n'd by a Foe,
Subtle or violent, we not endued
Single with like defence, wherever met,
How are we happy, we in fear of harm?
But harm not precedes sin: only our Foe
Tempting affronts us with his foul esteem
Of our integrity: his foul esteem
Sticks no honour on our front, but turns
Foul on himself; then wherefore shunned or fear'd
By us? Who rather double gain
From his surmise prov'd false, find peace within,
Favour from Heav'n, our witness from th' event.
And what is faith, love, virtue unassayed
Alone, without exterior help sustain'd?

...

Frail is our happiness, if this be so,
And *Eden* were no *Eden* thus exposed.

(9.322-341)

Each of the above speeches comes at a pivotal moment in the epic, specifically after the respective character has reached a decision and is in the process of justifying it. Placed side-by-side, however, they provide a rich illustration of the grammar of ethics and specifically the grammatical rules underlying the poem. In the first speech, Satan explains his intention to leave Hell and seek “the happy seat / Of some new race called *Man*” (2.347-348), but before finding it, he must endure, like Aeneas, “difficulty and danger.”

In the first lines quoted (“Long is the way / And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light”), Satan echoes the Sibyl’s admonition to Aeneas about the underworld: “easy— / the way that leads into Avernus: day / and night the door of darkest Dis is open. / But to recall your steps, to rise again / into the upper air: that is your labor” (6.126-129). The allusion, which is one of the grammatical rules, aligns Satan with the heroism of his epic precursors. But, as I discuss in greater detail below, the allusion demonstrates Milton’s critique of heroism, specifically the classical notion that holds glory (*kleos*) and courage (*aretê*) up as the highest ideals. And when placed beside Eve’s grammar of contrariety, “what if faith, love, virtue unassayed / Alone, without exterior help sustained?,” Satan’s heroism seems especially bombastic and empty. In these two competing scenes of heroism, which importantly demonstrate how the grammar of ethics necessarily engages the reader across the entire epic (the two scenes are separated by six books), Milton delineates Satan’s habituated features—features that artists held up for centuries as the model of heroic virtue—and juxtaposes them against Eve’s new heroism of contrariety. Satan thus represents, at least in the context of *Paradise Lost*, the conventionalized or standard idea of the hero that Milton challenges in and through the poem’s moral grammar.

Milton continues the interrogation of traditional heroism with great poignancy after the fall. In Book 11, Michael calls Adam’s attention to it: “For in those days might only shall be admired, / And valour and heroic virtue called; To overcome in battle, and subdue / Nations, and bring home spoils with infinite / Manslaughter” (11.689-693). But Eve, in her speech above, throws the traditional concept of heroism and Satan’s commensurate rhetoric (“Throne,” “imperial Sov’ranty,” “armed with power,”

“royalties,” “reign,” and “honour”) into question with her strong defense of self-sufficiency (“If this be condition to dwell / In narrow circuit straitened by a Foe [. . .] Eden were no Eden thus exposed”), thereby providing the additional rules that bring the two passages together: contrariety, choice, exposure, and multiplicity. In other words, Eve’s speech affords yet another perspective on heroism, which qualifies as the rule of multiplicity. By independently arriving at a decision, she chooses a moral path of her own (rule of choice), which in turn suggests she understands that virtue must be tried (“what is faith, love virtue unassayed”) to be true (rule of contrariety); and finally, the two juxtaposed scenes provide moral examples that the reader can experience with relative safety (rule of exposure). If the reader takes both speeches to be an example of Milton defamiliarizing heroism, and also takes into account the overt allusion to Vergil in the opening lines of Satan’s speech, she encounters six of the seven grammatical rules in relatively compressed sections of the poem. Finally, the passages also generate the necessary incertitude as the reader contemplates the two passages in her mind. Eve’s conditional “If” suggests that true deliberation not only occurs as she formulates her defense to Adam, but also signals to the reader that she too must work through both arguments. Eve, moreover, compounds the incertitude and provides evidence that she’s truly reasoning through the moral quandary by posing three questions to Adam (“If this be our condition [. . .] How are we happy, we in fear of Harm?”; “Then wherefore shunned or feared / By us?”; “What is faith, love, virtue unassayed / Alone, without exterior help sustained?”), which she answers confidently: “[this] were no Eden thus exposed.” The two opposing accounts of heroism highlight the specific need for uncertainty before making a choice. The scenes thus illustrate how important engaging

with all of the rules is to the grammar of ethics, and how not taking allusion or choice, for example, into account, would lead to an ungrammatical reading of the poem.

Another ungrammatical response to the poem would be for the reader to accept one of the grammatical rules as an ethical position in itself. Seneca, for example, in *De Beneficiis (On Favors)*, warns against snap judgments and separating single rules from their complex interlocking ethical network when he argues that an individual must take numerous actions and choices into account before deciding to bestow a gift upon someone. An unethical (ungrammatical) response to gift-giving, Seneca argues, would be to accept the rule, “always give to others,” as the *sole* rule of gift-giving, thereby ignoring the accompanying rules, “be discriminating about whom you give gifts to,” and, “never give a gift if you expect something in return.”¹³ All three rules must inform the ethics of gift-giving since privileging the first could potentially become a vicious act (e.g., giving a weapon to someone whom you know will do harm). Peter Herman’s insistence that the antinomies and aporias of *Paradise Lost* reveal Milton’s intended purpose constitutes an ungrammatical reading of the poem because it specifically ignores the other rules that qualify, inform, and most importantly link the grammar to a generative process, a process that cannot be separated into individual processes. Just as Quintilian argues that no single part of rhetoric (i.e., invention, memory, elocution, delivery, and disposition) should itself be taken as the whole of the art of rhetoric, no single grammatical rule should be taken as the entire grammar of ethics.¹⁴

An ungrammatical reading of *Paradise Lost*, moreover, ignores the fundamental generative quality of the grammar, the part that allows the reader to “be[come] a true

¹³ See Book 2 (“How to do a Favor”) of *On Favours* in *Moral and Political Essays*.

¹⁴ See *The Orator’s Education* 3.3

Poem” or author of herself (CPW 1.890). This is why, as a grammar, *Paradise Lost*’s ethics cannot be called an exercise or simply an ethical program; it does not submit to ethical dicta nor exempla that provide singular perspectives, but rather promotes an experientially based process which allows the reader to generate completely original positions independent of the governing rules.

Ungrammatical readings, however, as I emphasize above, are not incorrect reading, but rather readings that eschew the moral grammar, usually by imposing a theory or interpretation on the poem. Fish calls this the “theory mistake,” whereby “[critics] announce some grand theoretical truth (often a dubious one) and then claim to derive from it an interpretive conclusion, usually the conclusion that Milton is of the devil’s party without knowing it” (*Versions of Antihumanism* 131). William Empson has been labeled such a reader by many Milton scholars over the last half-century, and only recently, with the rise of the New Milton Critics and their emphasis on the poem’s aporias/indeterminacy, has he come back in favor. Empson’s most sustained engagement with the poem, *Milton’s God* (1961), perhaps the most powerful and persuasive ungrammatical reading of the poem to date, is an example of an interpretation that provides readers and scholars with alternative ways of seeing the poem. But Empson, as a reader who denies the poem’s full range of rules in his reading, misunderstands the poem in many fundamental ways. Empson ignores the rule of multiplicity by taking Satan as the poem’s hero, which in turn violates the rule of incertitude as a necessary stage of moral deliberation. Empson, moreover, along with Waldock, Herman, and Bryson, fails to grasp Milton’s proto-defamiliarizing narrative technique. Yes, the poem seems to side with Satan’s rhetoric; and yes, God seems vindictive and defensive (i.e., wicked), but

these are necessary means of estrangement that call into question our acculturation. I want to save the discussion of defamiliarization for the chapter on heroism (Chapter 4), but suffice it to say, as a grammatical rule, it explains why so many modern readers come away with different interpretations of the poem. Milton unsettles his readers where their understanding of persons, actions, and ideas do not correspond to reality or the normative conditions with which they are familiar.

However, one way to think of Empson's strong ungrammatical reading in a positive way would be to think of it along Bloomian terms, as a *misprision* (*clinamen* or swerve), one of Harold Bloom's seven revisionary ratios of reading. Misprision implies positive, creative readings that swerve from and therefore against precursors (in Empson's case, critics), establishing a new perspective for critical exploration and interpretation. I suggest that this is exactly what Empson achieves with his ungrammatical reading of the poem. Rather than providing a strong grammatical reading of the poem, he cleared, through his idiosyncratic yet brilliant analytical skills, a new interpretive angle (a new multiplicity) for others to engage. In fact, in the 1960s, *Milton's God* greatly influenced the strong readings of Christopher Ricks and Stanley Fish, and more recently, Neil Forsyth's *The Satanic Epic*. Herman also provides critical fodder through his ungrammatical reading of the poem. Many scholars have engaged with his reading to provide their own grammatical accounts of the poem.

All that I suggest by differentiating between grammatical and ungrammatical readings of the poem are the different ways in which critics approach the text. Some engage with the innate but foregrounded moral pattern, while others seek to isolate certain aspects of the poem, as in Nigel Smith's attempt to show that the poem turns to an

“internal history of the individual” after the failure of the revolution (224). The following reading does not take “grammatical” sides, but provides a reading of the grammar of ethics, a descriptive theory that identifies the pattern and attempts to illustrate how it works. In this sense, I extend Fish’s project in *How Milton Works* by not only discussing how Milton constructs the grammar of ethics, but also by showing how the reader actively engages with it.

Chapter 2: The Grammatical Rules

Were these [rules] or principles, from which all virtues are ultimately derived, mere values which could be exchanged against other values whenever people changed their minds about them?

-Hannah Arendt (*Responsibility and Judgment*)

Perhaps the most contested part of what I call *Paradise Lost's* grammar of ethics is the grammatical rules themselves. Many readers may wonder where the grammatical rules originate. Who determines or names them? Like Empson's ambiguities, do they simply stop at seven because the number possesses a quantity sufficient enough to generate an argument, or, as Namwali Serpell suggests in her study of experimental narrative, *Modes of Uncertainty*, does "seven (plus or minus two)" constitute "the upper limit of our working memory and our ability to differentiate between items" (39)? In the analogy that I have adopted, the grammatical rules lie within the poem itself just as the rules of grammar lie within the "language organ." A reader will recognize the underlying rules in a close reading of the poem even if she is not looking for them. J. Hillis Miller asks an important question of his own method in choosing texts to analyze as proper to an "ethics of reading," which I have also asked in identifying the grammatical rules: "Does not my choice of examples load the dice, predetermine the conclusions I can reach and, like all examples, in fact form the essence of the argument it is only meant to exemplify?" My answer is no, I did not choose the rules to make my argument. It is here that I depart from Chomsky, Mikhail, and Hauser, since all claim that a speaker is unaware of the innate principles. As Mikhail argues:

Linguists do not assume that the normal language user is aware of the system of rules or principles that constitute her knowledge of language, or that she can become aware of them through introspection, or that her statements about them are necessarily accurate. On the contrary, as a result of empirical investigation,

the rules of her language are assumed to lie beyond actual and even potential consciousness; moreover, it is taken for granted that her verbal reports and beliefs about her linguistic competence may be in error. (19)

Since I am dealing with linguistics only analogically, I depart from the analogy by suggesting that rules can be identified and named. In this respect, I rely on cognitive poetics, since it suggests ways that readers can identify patterns in texts and explain their response or experience of such patterns.

Lewis Carroll, however, introduces a problem about establishing principles as premises in his story, “What the Tortoise said to Achilles” (1895), that I should address before proceeding. In the discussion between the Tortoise and Achilles, the Tortoise proposes a series of arguments (syllogisms) that identify the problem of infinite regress; that is, in explaining a principle, one must rely on or propose another principle, which continues *ad infinitum*. In order to get out of an infinite regress, logicians simply accept the syllogism as such (as an axiom). The same applies to the rules of games, where once the players of the game accept the rules, the game can be played according to them.¹⁵

Milton seems to call attention to the grammatical rules in such a manner by foregrounding them, and in doing so affords the reader the opportunity to identify them and establish the parameters for analysis. Cognitive poetics treats foreground as part of the figure/ground distinction in texts, which helps to determine what features of a text stand out from one another:

The most obvious correspondence of the phenomenon of figure and ground is in the literary notion of foregrounding. Certain aspects of literary texts are commonly seen as being more important or salient than others. Though this is partly a subjective matter, it is also largely a matter of the cues that the text provides. (Stockwell 13-14)

¹⁵ See Wisdom, “Lewis Carroll’s Infinite Regress.” Wisdom criticizes what many readers see as the point of the story: “you should not treat ‘the principle of inference’ as a premise” (571).

The grammar of ethics constitutes such a salient feature of *Paradise Lost*. It forms a “perceived pattern” that becomes a dominant feature of the narrative. As Stockwell points out, the process of identifying such features of a text might at first seem subjective, but certain works—*Paradise Lost* being an especially strong example of foregrounding—provide cues or marks. Certain features of the text like repetition, rhetorical conventions, *epikrisis*, metaphor, syntactic alterations and so forth call attention to the grammatical rules. As I highlight below, all of the major characters of *Paradise Lost* (except for the unfallen Heavenly bodies) fall prey to the emotion of despair, a foregrounded feature of the text that is a staging ground, so to speak, for the grammar of ethics. Foregrounding, moreover, becomes key to Milton’s defamiliarization of the classical concept of heroism, a concept that Milton returns to again and again.

Paradise Lost’s grammar of ethics suggests that without grammatical rules, an ethics would be impossible. There must be innate means by which we come to have a moral relationship to the world. The rules, therefore, are not arbitrarily inserted to ensure certain readings at the expense of others. Throughout his writings, notably *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton insists on the power of *recta ratio* (right reason) to guide ethical decision-making.¹⁶ Even though man ultimately dictates the course of his action through free will and choice (“I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.” 3.97-99), he nevertheless possesses certain innate powers to differentiate between good and evil:

¹⁶ “But also Conscience—or right reason, assuming this to be the same, for not even in all the worst people is one or other of them asleep—testifies to God’s existence. Unless he existed, there would be no distinction between right and wrong, all assessment of virtue and vice would be placed on blind human opinion, no one would pursue virtue and not one would abstain from vices through shame or through fear of the laws, unless conscience or right reason constantly gave each person, however unwilling, and inner conviction that some God exists as controller and Lord of all” (*De Doctrina Christiana* 1.2).

And I will place within them as a guide
My umpire *Conscience*, whom if they will hear,
Light after light well us'd they shall attain,
And to the end persisting, safe arrive.
(3.194-197)

In the process of justifying his actions and telling the heavenly host of angels what the future holds for man, God calls the reader's attention to the fact that he has placed in man the innate ability to distinguish between right and wrong ("Sufficient to have stood"), and thus washing his hands, so to speak, of blame.

Immanuel Kant, echoing the function of reason as the guide to moral action, formulates a similar, but *strictly* rational (as opposed to *recta ratio's* divine origin) account of man's inner ability to determine right and wrong, through what he famously called the *categorical imperative*, which "the human mind applies whenever it has to tell right from wrong. [Kant] compared his formula to a 'compass' with which men will find it easy 'to distinguish what is good, what is bad . . . Without in the least teaching common reason anything new'" (Arendt 62).¹⁷ I bring Kant into the discussion of reason because he, like Milton, relies on reason to sift the proverbial wheat from the chaff, knowledge from opinion, but more importantly, to determine moral action based on principles. The grammatical rules, similarly, function as the poem's immanent guide to moral action. They do not determine the reader's ethical position, but rather provide the means by which the reader generates one for herself.

By limiting what I see as the salient rules (just as Emspon limits his ambiguities and M. H. Abrams his "Five Types of *Lycidas*"), I invite critical opposition that pushes the grammatical dialogue forward. Rather than focusing on correct interpretations of the

¹⁷ See Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:413-414. The compass comparison occurs at 4:404.

ethical/moral theory that *Paradise Lost* seems to endorse, I engage with the underlying principles to determine which principles permit grammatical readings and how. The rules are therefore open to elaboration, alteration, and challenge. The grammar of ethics in a sense already poses such challenges to emendation and alteration; I am just calling attention to it and formulating a descriptive theory of both the principles and the generative process. The grammar of ethics, in other words, compels readers to creatively work through the poem, closely looking at allusion, contrariety, defamiliarization, ambiguity, etc., to generate their own ethical positions.

Chapter 3: The Grammar of Despair: Satan, Belial, Adam and Eve

Milton's theory of virtue, which the reader encounters through and in the moral grammar of the poem, is surprisingly positive and hopeful. Rather than the "Pascalian sense of the disorientation and misery [after] the fall," Milton provides a picture of Adam and Eve working through their condition and applying their "fallen" reason to "repair[ing] their ruins" (Turner 178). However, before Adam and Eve can place themselves in a position to receive Michael's prophecies and therefore begin their education, they must undergo a trial of despair. The treatment of Adam and Eve's despair in Book 10 is diametrically opposed to the treatment of Satan's postlapsarian despair of Books 1 and 4 and Belial's of Book 2. In what follows, an analysis of the various scenes depicting despair serves to highlight how the grammar of ethics functions in the poem.

One of the first grammatical rules to appear in *Paradise Lost* is multiplicity. Multiplicity ensures that no moral perspective goes unchallenged. The positioning of competing claims beside and against one another allows the reader to weigh and consider the merits of each, guaranteeing that she avoids becoming a "heretic in the truth" (CPW 2.543). Multiplicity, in other words, provides an enlargement of despair, a broadening of the poem's moral canvas through discrete perspectives.

These multiple perspectives of despair occur both in the early and late books of the poem, specifically Books 1, 2, 4, and 10. Milton strategically couples Satan and Belial's (along with the other fallen angels') despair together, drawing attention both to their emotional and rhetorical nature, which, as the epic narrator points out, lacks reason. Reason, as Adam and Eve's perspective in the last three books illustrates, is the fittest

response to despair, a response that checks emotion and places one's moral claims in the service of a discursive process directed towards God's "prospect high" (3.77). Adam and Eve's despair scene, moreover, provides justification for the epic narrator's early corrections. Without their correct example, the narrator's interjections would lack the moral qualification from which to challenge the other perspectives.

The first appearance of a character in the throes of despair occurs early in Book 1, when Satan first speaks, "rackt with deep despair," to his compeer Beelzebub:

If thou beest hee; But O how fall'n! how chang'd
From him, who in he happy Realms of Light
Cloth'd with transcendent brightness didst outshine
Myriads thou bright: If he whom mutual league,
United thoughts and counsels, equal hope,
And hazard in the Glorious Enterprise,
Join'd with me once, now misery hath join'd
In equal ruin.

(1.84-91)

Satan's description of Beelzebub, which provides one of the earliest accounts of their unsuccessful attempt to take Heaven, begins with an immediate acknowledgment of their fallen condition. "O how fall'n" expresses what might be termed Satan's "metaphysical crisis." Satan seems astonished in his descriptive contrast between their former luminescence and their current misery. But by Book 2, when Satan responds to the council of fallen angels, he has assumed the confident position of a rhetorician: "Thrones and Imperial Powers, off-spring of Heav'n / Ethereal Virtues; or these Titles now / must we renounce, and changing style be call'd / Princes of Hell" (2.310-313). The rhetorical mode of argumentation in this extended scene is what Quintilian calls *paradiastole*, or the

redescription of vices as virtues.¹⁸ By “changing style,” that is, by changing their “Ethereal Virtues” for vices, Satan flips the value system and establishes a “new League / Banded against [God’s] throne” (2.319-320), but in a rhetorical mode that uses the language of virtue to describe their vicious acts of deceit and malice (“Evil be thou my good.” 4.110). In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides famously recounts how “evaluative terms begin to be misapplied when communities fall into civil war” (Skinner 153):

As a result of these revolutions, there was a general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world. The simple way of looking at things, which is so much the mark of a noble nature, was regarded as a ridiculous quality and soon ceased to exist [. . .] To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member. (242-244)

Throughout Books 1 and 2, Satan makes “a thoughtless act of aggression” (the rebellion) into a courageous act. In other words, Satan turns *paradiastole* into an art and a mode of being, not just a rhetorical device. He intentionally redescribes (e.g., “Evil be thou my good”) vices as virtues in order to rouse up the angels, but also in an effort to suppress his true despair: “All is not lost; the unconquerable Will, / And study of revenge, immortal hate, / And courage to never submit or yield / What is else not to be overcome?” (1.106-108). Satan, like the Spartan and Athenian leaders of Thucydides’ *History*, sees revenge as the most desirable form of courage (The redescription of revenge as courage runs through Satan’s rhetoric). Satan spins his plan to corrupt mankind (1.345-378) so that it “seems admirable,” but in “professing to serve the interest of the [fallen angels],” he really “seek[s] to win the prize for [himself],” an act that illustrates not only Satan’s “love

¹⁸ See Skinner, “Paradiastole: Redescribing the Vices as Virtues.”

of power,” but also his unwillingness to come to terms with his fallen condition (Thucydides 243).

The most direct and overt use of *paradiastole* comes just a few lines after the Leviathan simile, which describes Satan through strategic natural and mythological references (e.g., a whale, giants), suggesting the majesty, power, and mutability of someone who could utter, “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n [. . .] Here we may reign secure. And in my choice / To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: / Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (1.261-263). Satan’s expands on this rhetoric later in Book 2, but the epic narrator interjects with an *epikrisis*, or commentarial judgment, showing that Satan’s rhetoric and position are both self-deceptive and false: “So spake th’ Apostate Angel, though in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despair.”¹⁹ The epic narrator’s successive use of “though” and “but” qualify the previous lines. *Epikrisis*, moreover, as part of the moral grammar, provides a position of correction and judgment, not as in the case of *Eikonoklastes*, where it is a strategy that is “largely the product of the conditions of *controversia*,” but instead as an ethical position to illuminate erroneous behavior (Shore 91). Such a strategy (position/counter position) provides the reader with an example of what becomes the first rule of the grammar of ethics, multiplicity, which provides multiple other perspectives for the reader to engage and assess.

When the reader moves to the council of fallen angels in Book 2, a similar “discrediting judgment” takes place *both* before and after Belial speaks (Shore 91). Belial’s suggestions are further evidence of misguided despair, a despair that holds to the

¹⁹ See Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*.

weakness of “patien[t] sloth” and “ignoble ease.” The argument, while seemingly rational (“cloth’d in reason’s garb”) and practical, fails to realize despair as a challenge to improve and learn from one’s mistakes. As the first *epikrisis* suggests (2.110-118), Belial’s arguments are always “false” and “hollow,” the locutions of a master rhetorician who could “make the worse appear / the better to reason” (2.112-113). Rather than treating despair as a passing moment on the way to hope, Belial treats it as a permanent condition of incertitude, a condition that stems from a fear of greater punishment and the potential loss of “intellectual being” (2.147). This response, as the narrator makes clear, is empty and weak, the words of a vicious angel who counsels “Timorous and slothful” deeds (2.116). Belial, like Satan, thus provides another perspective on despair—one that the narrator frames with condemnation—that allows the reader to gauge its merit and worth.

The most powerful depiction of despair occurs in Book 4, in Satan’s apostrophe to the sun (32-113). Satan, like Macbeth, moves through a process of ratiocination that touches the sublime. Line-by-line he weaves in and out of “ire, envy, and despair.” Such a willed response to despair constitutes what Kierkegaard calls “demonic despair”:

The more consciousness there is in such a sufferer who in despair wills to be himself, the more his despair intensifies and becomes demonic. It usually originates as follows. A self that in despair wills to be itself is pained in some distress or other that does not allow itself to be taken away from or separated from his concrete self. So now he makes precisely this torment the object of all his passion, and finally it becomes a demonic rage. (71-72)

“Demonic despair,” Kierkegaard continues, “is the most intensive form of the despair: in despair to will to be oneself.” Satan, however, after embracing his demonic despair and “rebell[ing] against all existence [. . .] against its goodness” (Kierkegaard 73), chooses to move forward with a rhetorical sendoff to hope: “So farewell Hope, and with Hope

farewell Fear, / Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good” (108-110).

But, as with the earlier scenes in Books 1 and 2, the narrator checks Satan’s rhetoric, exposing him as “counterfeit” through one of the most imagistic *epikrises*:

Thus while he spake, each passion dimm’d his face,
Thrice chang’d with pale, ire, envy, and despair,
Which marr’d his borrow’d visage, and betray’d
Him counterfeit, if any eye beheld.
For heav’nly minds from such distempers foul
Are ever clear. Whereof hee soon aware,
Each perturbation smooth’d with outward calm,
Artificer of fraud; and was the first
That practis’d falsehood under saintly show,
Deep malice to conceal, couch’t with revenge.
(2.114-122)

The epic narrator’s corrective of Satan’s soliloquy employs diction of deceit to expose Satan’s moral position as false: “counterfeit,” “falsehood,” “conceal,” “fraud,” “borrow’d,” “marr’d,” “chang’d,” “betray’d,” “couch’t,” and “foul” all suggest duplicitous behavior. The narrator, moreover, links Satan’s verbal attempt to obfuscate his true feelings (“ire, envy, and despair”) through vaunted rhetoric with his attempt to hide his “falsehood” (as Satan) under the “saintly show” of a cherub’s “borrow’d visage.” Satan’s internal viciousness and deceitful physique, by reflecting one another, illustrate, once again, the fundamental fault in his character: self-deception. As the “Artificer of fraud,” Satan lies to others, but more importantly, to himself. The entire scene reflects not only Satan’s inability to come to terms with himself, but also his refusal to employ reason. Reason, what Satan seems to bury under his despair, would allow hope, repentance, and submission (“that word / *Disdain* forbids” him)—all responses that he dismisses—to remedy his condition. The opening scene of Book 4 is the most dramatic scene of the

early books precisely because it provides a portrait of immoral interiority that lies against itself by deceiving itself, a position to which the epic narrator suggests Adam and Eve provide the illustrative corrective.

Satan's inability to move beyond his despondency provides an important counterpoint to Adam and Eve's eventual struggle with despair, specifically Adam's "O miserable" soliloquy in Book 10. Unlike Adam, who overcomes despair through critical self-examination and a "more attentive mind" (10.1011), Satan lets anger—the most pernicious of emotions—prolong his despair. Milton deftly constructs the early episodes of despair, much like the movements of a symphony, so as to build to both an emotional and ethical climax. The crescendo (Book 9), to extend the musical analogy, affords the reader various points of moral interrogation, points that challenge and elicit response, but not, as Fish suggests, points that intentionally "harass" the reader (Fish 4). The multiplicity of despair, as in the scene above, "strips the ethical pretensions from [the fallacious] arguments [to] reveal the basic, underlying vices" (Steadman 253). The *epikrises*, in particular, serve to "correct [], by disclosing the true *ethos*, the latent evil under the spurious guise of honor" (Steadman 253). These shifts or oscillations between perspectives clearly illustrate the poem's rich moral grammar of multiplicity. By the time the reader reaches the central Book of despair in the poem, Book 10, she is in a proper position to appreciate Adam's final speech dissuading Eve from suicide. Milton's complex deployment of conflicting scenes—all powerfully realized and dramatically charged—and their subsequent correctives, affords multiple other perspectives of despair for the reader engage with, thus avoiding prescriptive measures and allowing the reader to judge for herself.

Book 10 represents the culmination of the poem's treatment of despair and provides the central counterexample to the perspectives of Satan and the rebel angels. After Adam's comes to terms with his fallen condition and after his "heart relent[s] / Towards [Eve]" (10.940-941), he provides the necessary "Commiseration" lacking in the other discussions of despair. Adam, moreover, employs "Love" as an additional cure to move beyond the thievery of despair, thus providing multiple correctives absent in the other perspectives:

[R]ise, let us no more contend, nor blame
Each other, blam'd enough elsewhere, but strive
In offices of Love, how we may light'n
Each other's burden in our share of woe.
(10.958-961)

Although Adam and especially Eve are not quite free from "woe[']s" clutch at this point, the scene nevertheless illustrates the rational and therapeutic development in their engagement with despair. Adam and Eve genuinely communicate, albeit in a manner fraught with blame and accusation, to reach a solution that provides hope, the corrective to despair. In this respect, they provide another perspective in the grammar of multiplicity nearly opposite that of Satan and Belial's, both of whom dismiss hope.

The antithetical presentation of despair through multiple other perspectives provides the necessary alternatives or counterfactuals that Milton suggests are necessary to moral thinking. Through its use of multiplicity, *Paradise Lost* "discloses complexities of human life and its concrete problems that the abstract methods of moral philosophy are ill-suited to communicate" (Deigh 293). The grammar of multiplicity, in other words, avoids enunciating "universal and necessary truths" as principles in favor of disparate

examples that illustrate the differences and intricacies of individual lives and the choices that comprise those lives (293).

Closely linked with the grammatical rule of multiplicity are the rules of contrariety and exposure. Under the heading, “Moral Evil,” in his commonplace book, Milton cites both the *Divine Institutes* and *On the Wrath of God* of Lactantius (ca. 260 AD- 340 AD) as central texts to understanding the importance of knowing “good by evil”:

Why does God permit evil? So that the account can stand correct with goodness. For the good is made known, is made clear, and is exercised by evil. As Lactantius says, Book 5 c[hapter] 7, that reason and intelligence may have the opportunity to exercise themselves by choosing the things that are good, by fleeing from the things that are evil. (CPW 1.363)

Milton’s argument, “That which purifies us is triall, and triall is by that which is contrary” (CPW 2.515), which he formulates in *Areopagitica*, stems largely from Lactantius’s principle of contrariety, but also from Stoic ethics. In one of the few discussions of the principle of contrariety in Milton scholarship, Dennis Danielson notes that “[Milton’s] reference to virtue’s being achieved ‘not without dust and heat’ recalls Seneca’s view that ‘good men are shaken in order that they may grow strong,’ and that ‘all his adversaries [the brave man] counts mere training’” (174). Surprisingly, Danielson overlooks an even likelier Roman influence on the principle of contrariety, Cicero, who as a public orator and philosopher understood the importance of conflict and trial to the development of virtue:²⁰

But next, our speech-making must be led out from the sheltered training ground of our home right into the fray, into the dust and the din, into the camp and the front

²⁰ Danielson likely overlooks this important source because the Yale edition of Milton’s prose omits the reference from its otherwise comprehensive notes. One has to go back to John Hales’ excellent 1875 Oxford edition of *Areopagitica* to find the Cicero reference. cf. Michael West’s “‘Not without Dust and Heat’: A Ciceronianism in Milton’s *Areopagitica*.”

line of the forum. We must confront the gaze of the whole world. The powers of our native ability must be put to the test, and our secluded preparation must be brought into the light of reality. (*On the Orator* 1.157)

Milton strongly echoes Cicero's "must be brought into the light of reality" ethic in the famous "cloister'd vertue" argument of *Areopagitica*, which also echoes Corinthians I (9:24-25): "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every *man* that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things." But the likeliest influence on the grammatical rule of contrariety was Spenser, whose *Faerie Queene* provided a veritable orgy of educative contrariety. Nearly every episode in each of the finished six books of Spenser's Romance epic illustrates a major character testing his or her virtue through trial. Spenser provided for Milton a fictive model—not a theological or philosophical model—of how contrariety informs the practice of the good life, and how individuals are "purified by trial against their own or their adversaries' impurity" (Cooper 45).

In the despair episodes of *Paradise Lost*, Milton provides numerous illustrations of characters in conflict, their rhetoric in direct opposition (e.g., the council of fallen angels). Book 9, however, provides the richest discussion of contrariety in the poem, as it is the temptation book, but also the book in which Adam and Eve discuss the redistribution of their workload through separation. Eve's powerful and ultimately convincing defense of autonomy and self-sufficiency, discussed earlier, highlights the grammatical rule of contrariety and illustrates the importance of exposure to the virtuous life:

If this be our condition, thus to dwell
In narrow circuit strait'n'd by a Foe,
Subtle or violent, we not edu'd
Single with like defense, wherever we met

How are we happy, still in fear of harm?
(9.322-326)

Eve's plea for an ethics of contrariety constitutes one of the central arguments of the poem, an argument that many scholars take to be Milton's own personal theory of virtue. She, rather than Adam, seeks to ensure that all virtue, and by extension ethical thinking, is pure and not "whitenesse excrementall" (CPW 2.516). Contrariety, in this sense, closely aligns with James Grantham Turner's notion of an 'Ethics of confrontation.'

One aspect of Milton's grammar of ethics that makes it so appealing and thus so powerful is its willingness to promiscuously and vigorously explore the fallen condition (including Satan's), providing as exploratory an exposure as possible. As Turner suggests,

[R]ather than lamenting th[e fallen] condition like common expositors, Milton explores its moral implications with unusual vigour [. . .] By endowing Adam and Eve with the same ethical and psychological situation as ourselves, and even making their freedom depend on strenuous experiential choices, Milton effectively promotes the law of temperance over the fallen/unfallen division. The fall was a profoundly important historical event to him [. . .] but the dramatic reenactment of its dilemma is even more important. (Turner 176-180)

Turner's "reenactment" observation derives much of its argument from Fish's more outlandish claim that the reader herself metaphorically falls in the act of reading, but what Turner shrewdly observes, thus correcting Fish, is the way in which Milton explores this process in an aesthetic or Aristotelian sense, focusing more adeptly on the issue of temperance (*mean*) and its attending deliberative process than the actual fall itself. This ethics of exposure, or experience by way of aesthetic distance, is what Milton promotes in *Areopagitica* as the safest way to know evil without actually experiencing it:

How can we more safely, and with lesse danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity then by reading all manner of tractats, and hearing all manner of reason?

And this is the benefit which may be had by books promiscuously read. (*CPW* 2.517).

For Milton and the many humanist readers who see literature as an educative method of “hearing all manner of reason,” this is the *raison d’etre* of reading, specifically fiction. Fiction exists, to modify Nietzsche’s argument for art (“We possess *art* lest we *perish from truth*”), so that we may know sin without actually indulging in it (435). We can imagine, understand, and even empathize with evil, but only at an aesthetic and safe distance.

The grammar of exposure not only relies for its variety on multiplicity but also on a much more controversial grammatical rule, incertitude. Recently, in Milton studies, critics have latched on to *Paradise Lost*’s narrative inconsistencies, contradictions, and “displacements.” They no longer see these “fissures” and ambiguities as “superficial aspects of the poem that a ‘proper’ understanding of the poem erases,” but rather as part of Milton’s “poetics of incertitude” (Herman 181). Peter Herman, the loudest member of this aporetic choir, suggests that these conflicting claims and unresolved issues in the poem derive in part from England’s failed Revolution, and Milton’s “turmoil of not knowing what to affirm in its wake” (Herman 183). For Herman, the poem’s aporias actually create great poetry, and provide the reader with a richer poem than the orthodox version that Bush, Lewis, and Fish read.

The New Milton Critics, and Herman specifically, are right about the poem’s “unresolved antinomies,” but they fail to see that the poem’s antinomies serve a far different purpose than promoting interpretive incertitude; they provide the poem with a key rule in its moral grammar. Incertitude, which is just a recent neologism in a wide connotative family that includes ambiguity, uncertainty, and indeterminacy, is deeply

imbedded in *Paradise Lost*'s moral and narrative structure. Herman and Susannah Mintz, for example, suggest that the most blatant indeterminate *copia* (abundances)—“the Miltonic “or”—structure “passages so that they present *unresolved choice[s]*,” which then “result in [the] erosion [. . .] of certainty” (Herman 44).²¹ This observation, while superficially true, really only applies to the similitic convention of extending comparisons, a convention that Milton exploits, but does not result in *true* unresolved moral choices. The narrative “or’s” and “various voices [. . .] present[ing] radically different versions of the same event” that Herman argues are the center of Milton’s “poetics of incertitude,” are really the grammar of ethics moving—i.e., asserting itself—through narrative time. The “or’s,” as Herman rightly suggests, do in fact function as the “DNA [. . .] of the poem’s competing narratives,” but do so as multiplicity, creating other perspectives (43). “Of Oreb, or of Sinai” (1.7), “with secret gaze, / Or open admiration” (3.671-672), do represent alternatives, choices, but choices that unfurl as the poem progresses (Satan, for example, both gazes in secret *and* open admiration, but of course not *as* Satan). Milton does not intend the reader to get bogged down with the minutiae of the “or,” but rather to move along holding the alternatives in her mind. In other words, the narrative promotes incertitude so that the other rules (e.g., choice, contrariety, allusion, defamiliarization) have time to develop. Incertitude, in many ways, operates as the key rule that distinguishes fiction from exempla or systematic works of moral philosophy. It imbeds the narrative with uncertainty so as to suspend judgment and promote deliberative thinking.

²¹ The 16th C. Erasmian commentator, Weltkirch, defined *copia* as the “faculty of varying the same expression or thought in many different ways by means of different forms of speech and a variety of figures and argument.” According to Erasmus himself, *copia* carries the meaning of four English words: *variation*, *abundance*, *eloquence*, and the *ability* to vary thought and expression. cf. *On Copia of Words and Ideas*.

The psychology of fallenness and its attendant despair is by nature indeterminate. Despair, Satan suggests, provokes uncertainty: “Me miserable! Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?” (4.73-74). Milton captures this same uncertainty at the narrative level, delaying the correct emotional response to despair until the dénouement. In the pivotal scenes of despair, with Satan, Belial, Adam and Eve all providing different perspective, and the narrator providing a fifth commentarial perspective, Milton purposely shifts between accounts so that in the final moment of Book 10, when Adam and Eve are at their most emotionally fragile, Adam, “with more attentive mind” (1011), moves both himself and Eve towards the first ray of hope:

[L]et us seek
 Some safer resolution, which methinks
 I have in view, calling to mind with heed
 Part of our Sentence, that thy Seed shall bruise
 The Serpent’s head.

(10.1028-1032)

Despair, as Adam paradoxically illustrates, motivates much of the poem’s action and the corresponding incertitude forces certain choices, indicating incertitude’s moral function in the poem. Incertitude thus acts in conjunction with other rules (multiplicity, confrontation, etc.) to exercise reason and choice, the grammatical rule that informs nearly all the rules discussed. Part of the ethical function of incertitude is to act as a foil to the virtues of temperance and patience in instances where the narrative presents counterfactuals, or alternatives. Incertitude promotes *prohairesis* (moral reasoning) since the moral options are not always clearly delineated (i.e., one must work to arrive at a decision).²² Much of *Paradise Lost*’s moral fecundity/richness derives from moments

²² *Prohairesis*, which appears as a key concept in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, receives more extensive treatment by the Stoics, in particular by Epictetus (cf. *The Discourses* 2.6). Milton discusses it in *Of Education* (CPW 2.396).

when the text poses interpretive obstacles and seems to be making multiple claims at once. In her study of the spiritual and material substance in *Paradise Lost*, N. K.

Sugimura argues that Milton is not necessarily concerned with a single philosophical position, but with many, and that the writing of verse, as opposed to prose, allows him to explore complex ideas and conflicting positions with greater freedom:

Milton's thinking is [] enhanced and rendered more complex by the creative context of poetry, in which the implications of different philosophic ideas are more fully explored and developed through the very act of writing verse [. . .] To speak of *Paradise Lost* as supporting a given philosophical position—is to misunderstand his poetic purpose. *Inconsistencies and contradictions abound in the poetry, and it is to be expected since things happen in epic that do not occur in systematic philosophy.* The pressures of literary form on the poem's subject matter produce a mode of thinking in verse that is richly *exploratory*. (xiv-xv, my emphasis)

Sugimura adroitly pinpoints why *Paradise Lost* struggles with “inconsistencies and contradictions” and explains what most aporetic critics miss in their championing of incertitude, i.e., its “exploratory” power. Unlike critics who tend to view the poem's inconsistencies as problems Milton left unresolved due to personal “anxiety,” Sugimura shrewdly interprets the tensions and contradictions as intentionally providing a way to contemplate alternatives and thus examine the difficulty of the moral life with greater care.

By looking at incertitude as part of the poem's moral grammar, it becomes clear that its role is not that of irresolution or obfuscation, but of ensuring that the reader employs reason to arrive at a deliberate choice. Incertitude must precede choice so that the reader does not become a “heretic in the truth.” Incertitude, in other words, underlies moral and ethical development. The inconsistencies within the narrative serve to draw

connections to similar issues outside the world of the poem, some of which are brought to the reader's attention through the poem's copious use of allusion.

Harold Bloom argued, famously, that allusion provides the best textual evidence of Milton's struggle with and "usurpation" of his precursors.²³ By overgoing his rival poets, both ancient and modern, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton asserts his priority and establishes his central place in literary history, not as a belated poet, but as one whose allusive power sets him aesthetically prior to everyone else, even the Bible. One early instance and commonly cited example of this attempt to correct and overgo his precursors is the epic narrator's description of Mulciber's fall:

Nor was his name unheard or unadorn'd
In ancient *Greece*; and in *Ausonian* land
Men call'd him *Mulciber*; and how he fell
From Heav'n, they fabl'd, 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
Dropt from the Zenith like a falling Star,
On *Lemnos* th' *Aegean* Isle: thus they relate,
Erring; for he with his rebellious rout
Fell long before.

(1.739-748)

The allusion to Mulciber's fall from heaven, the fall that Homer recounts in Book 1 of *The Iliad* as Hephaestus's fall, provides Milton with an opportunity to correct his precursors and claim priority through biblical precedence. Even though the actual story of Mulciber's fall is not recounted in the Bible, Milton nevertheless draws from the story of the fall of the rebel angels (2 Peter 2:4) to insert his own version (one might say, "the authorized version") and push Hephaestus's "Greek" fall to a secondary position, thus both prioritizing his poetic art and passing judgment on the susceptibility of pagan

²³ See Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, chapter 7, "Milton and his precursors."

literature to error. This “crowding of the imagination,” however, as Johnson called Milton’s tendency to overload his poetry with references, leads to some of the disjunctions and contradictions that the aporetic critics latch onto as problems in the narrative, specifically the “mixed signals of Milton’s metaphors” (Herman 27). But, as Daniel Shore points out, such an allusive procedure allows Milton to “preserv[e] the idolatrous myth of the past” by “invest[ing] idols with the highest rhetorical and aesthetic appeal even as he subjects them to discrediting judgment” (92). “Thus they relate / Erring,” while itself an allusion to Plato (“First then, it seems, we must supervise the storytellers, accepting what they do well and rejecting what they don’t [. . .] For they told people stories and composed falsehoods, and still do” (*Republic* 2.377c-d)), nevertheless suggests a judgment, a judgment that allows Milton to prioritize his authorized version of the fall at the expense of the aestheticized others. Such allusion not only creates a multiplicity of account, but also provides carefully delineated “other” perspectives, which contribute to moral growth.

As part of the poem’s grammar of ethics, allusion allows Milton to place objects, words, scenes, concepts, and individuals beside and against one another. The similes carry much of the poem’s allusive cargo, but many of the poem’s other allusions refer to scenes, such as the fall scene above, that open up and provide ethical import through discrete measures such as *transumption*, or *metalepsis*. Transumption, which Quintilian defined as the “movement [or transition] from one trope to another,” allows Milton to “take[] hold of something poetically in order to revise it upward, as is were, cancelling and transforming [it]” (Hollander 147). Such a figure in Milton’s hands becomes not only a *modus operandi*, but also a way to build the poem out of the past and into the future (a

prophetic and shamanistic gesture), a procedure that Gordon Teskey sees as a defining mark of Milton's modernity.

Allusion, moreover, provides Milton with a grammatical rule that allows him to "construct and unify the fictions of the poem" (Quint 2). When it comes to despair, an emotion not lacking in canonical sources, both religious and secular, there are many *loci classici* from which Milton likely drew inspiration to construct the episodes: Satan's soliloquy in Book 4 echoes the sentiment and rhetoric of Prometheus in Aeschylus's play, *Prometheus Bound*, and Belial at times seems to parrot Spenser's *Despayre* (both of which are again echoed in Adam's soliloquy in Book 10). However, the richest analogue in the despair cycle is the suicide discussion between Philoclea and Pyrocles in Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1593). Under the heading, "Death Self-Inflicted," in his commonplace book, Milton cites Sidney's *Arcadia* as a place where the topic of suicide is "disputed with exquisite reasoning" (CPW 1.371). The passage clearly provides a moving meditation on despair and suicide that Milton exploits in Book 10:

Having a small while stayed upon the greatness of his resolution and looked to the furthest of it: 'Be it so,' said the valiant Pyrocles. 'Never life for better cause nor to better end was bestowed; for if death be to follow this doing (which no death of mine could make me leave undone) who is to die so justly as myself? And if I die, who can be so fit executioners as mine own hands, which, as they were the accessories to the doing, so in killing me they shall suffer their own punishment.

And Eve:

Let us make short,
Let us seek Death, or he not found, supply
With our own hands his office on ourselves;
Why stand we longer shivering under feares,
That show no end but death, and have the power,
Of many ways to die the shortest choosing,
Destruction with destruction to destroy.
(10.1000-1006)

Both Pyrocles and Eve's reasoning echoes the Stoic justification for suicide most famously represented by Cato the Younger, who while captured in Africa (46 BCE) took his own life rather than continuing to live under Caesar's tyranny. The main tenets of Stoic ethical theory regarding suicide, which Pyrocles and Philoclea work out in great detail through a moving point-counterpoint exchange, argue that fear of future evil and shame are grounds for taking one's life. If one's virtue, or sole good in this world, has been compromised, self-inflicted death is condoned. Eve's suggestion of suicide takes both of these justifications into account, especially the fear of future evil. She sees death as the prudent and right thing to do, considering the curse looming over future mankind's head. But Adam, perceiving Eve's weakness for passionate "destruction," modifies Philoclea's rebuttal to Pyrocles, specifically her argument, "I have heard my father and other wise men say that killing one's self is but a false colour of true courage" (742), by introducing the Christian notion of "hope," the antidote to despair, which Satan had flagrantly dismissed in Book 4:

Eve, thy contempt of life and pleasure seems
To argue in thee something more sublime
And excellent then what thy mind contemns;
But self-destruction therefore sought, refutes
That excellence thought in thee, and implies,
Not thy contempt, but anguish and regret
For loss of life and pleasure overlov'd.
Or if thou covet death, as utmost end
Of misery, so thinking to evade
The penalty pronounc't, doubt not but God
Hath wiselier arm'd his vengeful ire then so
To be forestall'd; much worse I fear lest Death
So snatcht will not exempt us from the pain
We are both doom to pay; rather such acts
Of contumacy will provoke the Highest
To make death in us live [. . .]
No more be mentione'd then of violence
Against ourselves, and wilful barrenness,

That cuts us off from hope.
(10.1013-1028, 1041-1042)

Adam's "exquisite reasoning" aligns perfectly with the Christian ethos of patience, or doing and suffering, whether the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or the mistakes brought about by choice, as in the temptation scene. This form of rational love, both towards God and towards themselves, shows considerable growth and moral maturation lacking in Sidney's account, as powerful as it is. Allusion, at least in this scene, allows Milton to enrich the moral quandary that Adam and Eve find themselves in while proceeding to expand and modify earlier accounts through the Christian virtue of hope. Milton, in other words, corrects Sidney and the Stoics by showing that their reasoning is faulty when exposed to the light of Christian truth. The grammatical rule of allusion, as this scene clearly demonstrates, draws other voices into discourse and provides an opportunity for Milton to modify his precursors and establish both aesthetic and moral priority, thus providing a unifying and constructive logos that Quint argues is part of allusion's function in *Paradise Lost*. Allusion, in other words, provides not only a *modus operandi* for structuring the poem's relationship to the past, but also a way for Milton to discretely set competing perspectives beside one another. For Milton, allusion becomes a powerful tool for moral deliberation.

Chapter 4: Defamiliarizing the Heroic

The paradise that Milton imagines in and through the poem, like the early and innocent years of childhood, constitutes a primal scene of development, specifically a scene of ethics wherein man first learns the value of obedience, choice, good, evil, hope, despair, love, error, companionship, etc. This primal scene, which Milton estranges or defamiliarizes through what Quintilian calls (drawing on Aristotle) *enargeia* (vividness), constitutes a thorough remaking of paradise, a paradise at once more alive with wonder and possibility than anything in the biblical tradition. The vividness of Satan, for example—never before represented with such force, loquacity, and interiority—captures the imagination of the reader by estranging a portrait of the devil that had up to Milton’s poem been a rather underdeveloped embodiment of evil. Although Dante, drawing on Anslem (*The Fall of the Devil*) and other medieval writers, provides a powerful representation of the devil in *The Divine Comedy*, nothing matches the rhetorical splendor of Milton’s Satan, whose dramatic range rivals Shakespeare’s best villains. What Milton does with Satan, a feature that Shakespeare helps him to advance, is to turn him inward. According to Forsyth, “Milton moves the epic genre further towards modernity, and makes the discovery overlap with the Satanic voyage to the interior, and the sense of inner loss. Milton’s Satan has several important phases of self-discovery or self-fashioning before he becomes simply the enemy of mankind” (55). Evil, in other words, not only looks desirable in Milton’s training ground, but also intelligent and interesting, providing an aspirational component to the portrait of Satan that psychologically and phenomenologically explains why many readers find Satan (and by

extension, evil) so tempting. (By humanizing Satan, Milton makes him sympathetic.) This estranging effect, one of the poem's grammatical rules, explains what Harold Bloom means when he suggests "Milton expands scripture without distorting the word of God" (125). Milton, in this sense, reimagines the origin of good and evil for the reader so that it is no longer a debilitating struggle and fall (our habituated understanding), but a desirable trial and creation (i.e., a "paradise within"), or grammar of ethics. Milton turns a poem about man's disobedience into a creative poetics defined by experiment, discovery, and ethical choice. Through creative ethical development, a development that sees conflict, choice, and uncertainty as elemental parts of the process, Milton addresses one of the most important issues of epic poetry: heroism. The following chapter looks closely at defamiliarization in order to illuminate the concept of heroism, but also to provide deeper insight into the grammatical rules themselves. I couple a short discussion of allusion at the end to demonstrate how it informs defamiliarization.

Beginning as he does in Hell, in itself a defamiliarization and inversion of Paradise, which has descriptive precursors in Homer, Vergil, Zoroastrian literature, and Dante (among others), Milton develops the grammatical rule of defamiliarization to great effect. Satan, as discussed at the opening of this chapter, provides a key defamilairizing figure in the epic, specifically of epic heroism. Through Satan, Milton "carefully builds up a meticulously constructed portrait of spurious and specious heroism, the 'Idol of Majestie Divine' and the 'counterfeit resemblance' of heroic virtue" (Steadman xviii). The Defamiliarization of Satan involves an "antithesis between true and illusory patterns of hero or king, and the interplay between these contradictory norms underlies the ethical and poetic structures of the poem. This estranging of heroism, in other words, "serves as

a basis for Milton's reassessment of the conventional" understanding of epic heroism, an understanding augmented through the use of another grammatical rule, allusion, which he develops along with defamiliarization (Steadman xviii).

Heroism, as one of the central character concerns of the epic poet, does not seem to trouble Milton in the least, even as he juggles two ethical traditions in the poem: poetic heroism, which manifests itself in the sensuous and concrete character portraits of epic poetry, and Christian ethics, which "presents heroic virtue rationally and abstractly, as a general idea" (Steadman xix). Despite these two disparate and often contradictory traditions, Milton nevertheless "pursues the moral ends of heroic poetry by emphasizing the equivocal senses of heroism and playing one meaning against another. By this ethical and poetic counterpoint he sharpens the distinction between heroic image and *eidolon*" (Steadman (xix). Milton specifically uses Satan, the most ostensibly heroic in both action and thought, to expose the latent assumptions behind heroism, and to develop through the actions of characters like Adam, Eve, and the Son, what he calls in *Of Education*, "*true virtue*, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection" (CPW 2.367, my emphasis). But, before moving to Milton's analysis of epic heroism, we need to define defamiliarization, since, as a grammatical rule, it provides an important critique of heroism, and, moreover, a rule that few scholars have treated as part of the poem.

Viktor Shklovsky, one of the founding fathers of Russian Formalism, coined the term *ostranenie* (hereafter translated as defamiliarization or estrangement) in a 1917 essay called, "Art as Technique," to suggest that the "purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known, the technique of art

is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*” (12). This defamiliarizing technique thus shatters the “automated perception” (i.e., habituated perception) of objects and brings them, for the first time, into view, making the familiar unfamiliar. Shklovsky saw Tolstoy as the great master of such estrangement, since he not only described an object, but also described it as if he were “seeing it for the first time”:

After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways. Here I want to illustrate a way used by Leo Tolstoy, that writer who seems to present things as if he himself saw them, saw them in their entirety, and did not alter them.

Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes the object as if we are seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. (13)

For Milton, heroism, as a concept, has remained in the shadows of automated perception for too long and needs to be put to the test, specifically critiqued. Milton, however, builds on Shklovsky’s notion that the process of perception is aesthetic and must be prolonged, to include moral prolongation. To see heroism as it truly is, we must see it through its opposite, Satan, and if possible, through prolonged exposure. What better way to see something for and in itself than to see it through its antithetical position, especially through a character that invokes the rhetoric and passion of the traditional understanding of the concept? As Steadman notes, “Milton well knew the value of defining a concept by its opposite, and this method underlay his treatment of Satan and the conquerors idolized by the world.” (xv). Just as Tolstoy describes the institution of private property through

the voice of a horse who does not understand why people say “my colt” or “his colt,” Milton uses Satan to critique and put forward a theory of heroic virtue that exposes the weaknesses, inaccuracies, and moral turpitude of automated perception (Shklovsky 7). By altering the familiar perception (e.g., heroism as courage, valor, magnanimity, cunning, etc.) of an object or concept, a true and authentic view arises. Milton, in other words, does not shatter—as Steadman argues—the traditional notion of heroism as an *eidolon* to be held up and imitated, but rather empties, through defamiliarization, the concept of its traditional value and association. As Daniel Shore powerfully argues:

Far from destroying idols, Milton seeks to capture and preserve them under judgment, investing them with poetic care even as he hollows them out from the inside, thereby refashioning them as the instruments of their own disenchantments. (86)

Milton presents a heroic Satan, gloriously attractive, to discredit him, and with him, the traditional notion of heroism, but in the process, he demonstrates how important idols are to moral and ethical education. “As in Lucretius and Kant,” Shore continues, “the idolatrous sublime results in more than just aesthetic pleasure. Readers look upon idols without becoming enthralled and thereby rise to an awareness of their independence” (103). Certain readers—including Empson and Waldock—do not find such liberation; they remain enthralled to a heroism that Milton seeks to expose as false, and therefore provide an ungrammatical reading of the poem. But grammatical readers, like John Steadman, Stanley Fish, and Neil Forsyth, understand Milton’s defamiliarizing to be aesthetically pleasing, emotional, and ethically instructive.

An illustrative example of defamiliarization occurs early in the epic. Like all good poets, Milton introduces the stakes early, putting Satan on display so that he can prolong the process of emptying our habituated perception of heroism and replacing it with a true,

though unfamiliar, virtue; a virtue which, as discussed in relation to the grammatical rule of multiplicity, requires multiple other perspectives, without which Milton could not establish a deliberative process of moral reasoning:

So much the stronger prov'd
He with his thunder: and till then who knew
The force of those dire arms? Yet not for those,
Nor what the potent victor in his rage
Can else inflict, do I repent or change,
Though chang'd in outward lustre; that fixed mind
And high disdain, from sense of injur'd merit,
That with the mightiest raised me to contend,
And to the fierce contention brought along
Innumerable force of spirits arm'd
That durst dislike his reign, and me preffering,
His utmost power with adverse power oppos'd
In dubious battle on the plains of Heav'n,
And shook his throne.

(1.92-105)

Satan enumerates many of the characteristic attributes of classical heroism: courage, nobility (magnanimity), cunning, and most importantly, fortitude. The speech illustrates that even in defeat, Satan possesses strength of mind and heart that can endure “dire arms.” It is the type of heroism that one expects from a leader who in defeat, despite the “utmost power,” nevertheless reaches inside for “courage never to submit or yield” (1.108). The diction itself suggests as much: “stronger,” “thunder,” “force,” “valor,” “merit,” mightiest, “fierce contention,” “innumerable,” “reign,” “power,” “battle,” and “throne” all suggest traditional heroic rhetoric. Milton employs this diction to call attention to Satan’s “obdurate refusal to acknowledge his guilt and repent. What appears to be firmness of mind is in actuality the obstinacy of the unregenerate sinner, the

resolution of the hardened criminal” (Steadman 38). As mentioned earlier in relation to *epikrisis*, the narrator does not dismiss Satan, but puts him under judgment by framing the speech with commentary: “round he throws his baleful eyes / That witnessed huge affliction and dismay / Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate” (1.56-58). Before the speech even begins, the air of Satan’s heroism begins leaking out, so to speak, bringing into view, “pride” and “hate,” two unchristian and vicious emotions, as his true position. What would seem in the mouth of Achilles, Hektor, Aeneas, or Godfrey to be courageous and fortitudinous, in the mouth of Satan becomes villainy. Near the end of the epic, when Michael recalls the virtues to Adam, Milton again exposes and undermines the classical conception of heroism:

These are the products
Of those ill-mated marriages thou saw’st:
Where good and bad were matched, who of themselves
Abhor to join; and by imprudence mixed,
Produce prodigious births of godly mind.
Such were these giants, men of high renown;
For in those days might only shall be admir’d,
And valor and heroic virtue call’d;
To overcome in battle, and subdue
Nations, and bring home spoils with infinite
Manslaughter, shall be the highest pitch
Of human glory, and for glory done
Of triumph, to be styl’d great conquerors,
Patrons of mankind, gods, and sons of gods,
Destroyers rightlier called and plagues off men.
(11.683-697)

This is the heroism that Satan appeals to and embodies in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, a heroism that identifies “might” and “valor” as the twin aspects of virtue.

However, as Eve’s speech in Book 9 makes clear, this is not true virtue, but “excrementall whitenesse,” which Milton associates with the vestiges of the clergy, such as the cloak, cassock, and band, all unnecessary accouterments that he sees as evidence of feigned virtue (*CPW* 2.516). Michael, in other words, empties the Achillean—and with it, the whole of classical epic heroism—worldview of glory (*kleos*), or undying fame, as the greatest heroic good, by exposing its traditional strengths as weaknesses. Michael also introduces the tension between the material virtues of this world (“spoils”)—what Plato calls the human goods (wealth, beauty, etc.)—and those of the other world (divine virtues), which he introduces to Adam in Book 12:

Only add
 Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
 Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,
 By name to come called charity, the soul
 Of all the rest.
 (12.581-585)

By bringing Satan’s heroism into view, Milton provides a key grammatical rule that affords the reader the opportunity to see *and* critique heroism, both in its classical and Christian sense. He shows through Satan’s rhetoric how acculturation leads to an “automated perception” of heroism and possibly—as suggested earlier—to an inversion of the value system. (In a world that recognizes only power and might as virtues, the whole concept of heroism is in jeopardy.) Satan thus represents what I call “residual virtue” and Milton “white virtue,” i.e., a virtue that remains after a prolonged period of “cloister’d” behavior.²⁴ Milton, however, by preserving Satan under judgment, yanks the reader from her “cloister’d” state and exposes her to a moral process, one that requires

²⁴ See *CPW* 2.516

her to think through bias and prejudice, thus arriving at a judgment or position on her own.

Part of Milton's complex defamiliarizing of heroism involves the frequent use of allusion, what Harold Bloom calls—revising Christopher Ricks and Matthew Arnold—the most distinctive characteristic of Milton's grand style (125). Although I've discussed allusion in detail above, it remains to see how it works to substantiate and inform other grammatical rules.

As suggested earlier, allusion provides another method of emptying both idols and precursors of their power, a method that Bloom identifies as both defensive and transumptive, but that also allows for moral scrutiny. The heroism of Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas, for example, becomes specious in the words of Satan, and forces the reader to reevaluate her traditional understanding of virtue, especially as she proceeds through the narrative, encountering the holier position of Christ (which is fully realized in the sequel to *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain'd*), and eventually the postlapsarian position of Adam and Eve.

Allusion, as a grammatical rule, assists in defamiliarizing the objects and concepts of the poem through what Quintilian called *enargeia*, or vividness, and which Hazlitt refers to as the “vividness of actual observation”:

“Ornament” is what goes beyond lucidity and Acceptability. Its first two stages consist in <conceiving and> carrying out your intention; the third is the stage that puts the polish on, and may properly be called “finish.” We must thus count Ornament the quality of *enargeia*, which I mentioned in giving instructions for Narrative, because vividness, or, as some say, “representation,” is more than perspicuity, since instead of being merely transparent it somehow shows itself off. It is a great virtue to express our subject clearly and in such a way that it seems to actually be seen.” (8.3)

This vividness, which “brings objects into view,” primarily functions through the epic similes. The similes, as James Whaler, Christopher Ricks, and others have noted, expand the narrative to include additional material, whether mythical, economical, literary, philosophical, theological, scientific, natural, or maritime. Milton uses allusion, specifically in the similes, not just as defensive and transumptive mechanisms to correct, subsume, hollow-out, evade, or expand on his precursors, but also as a means of highlighting features of the narrative, specifically characters, (physical stature, rhetorical ability, moral activity, etc.), thus defamiliarizing key aspects of the story.

Quintilian’s vividness and Shklovsky’s defamiliarization both work with allusion in the bee simile (Book 1) to comment—by way of satirization and *be(e)littlement*—on the courtly heroism of the rebel angels entering Pandemonium:

As bees
In springtime, when the sun with *Taurus* rides,
Pour forth thir populous youth about the Hive
In clusters; they among fresh dews and flowers
Fly to and fro, or on the smoothed Plank,
The suburb of their Straw-built Citadel,
New rubb’d with balm, expatiate and confer
Thir State of affairs. So thick the aery crowd,
Swarm’d and were strait’n’d; till the signal giv’n,
Behold a wonder! They but now who seemed
In bigness to surpass Earth’s giant sons
Now less than smallest Dwarfs, in narrow room
Throng numberless, like that pygmean race
Beyond the *Indian* mount, or Faery Elves
Whose midnight Revels, by a forest side
Or fountain some belated Peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while over-heard the moon
Sits Arbitress, and nearer to the earth
Wheels her pale course, they on thir mirth and dance
Intent, with jocund Music charm his ear;
At once with joy and fear his heart rebounds.
Thus incorporeal Spirits to smallest forms
Reduc’d their shapes immense, and were at large,
Though without number still amidst the Hall

Of that infernal Court.

(1.768-792)

Immediately, readers familiar with epic poetry will notice the reference to the classical bee similes of Homer and Vergil (among the countless others who employ it), but Milton makes an antithetical comparison, specifically calling the reader's attention to their diminishment in the turn or *volta* of the simile (l. 77)—one of Herman's aporetic "or's"—which positions the angels in a negative comparison, thus adding a significant amount of vividness to the simple simile (ll. 68-76). Rather than the traditional A (rebel angels) is like B (bees) or C (earth's giants), Milton adds D (dwarfs), E (pygmean races), and F (faerie elves). Unlike the industrious Carthaginians of Vergil's simile, Milton suggests, the rebel angels hardly represent heroic industry; their enterprise, which is to build a city in Hell and not a major trade port on the coast of Africa, actually resembles the revels of faerie elves, who "on their mirth and dance / Intent." (Nor does the comparison to the gathering Achaean leaders, which actually gather so that Odysseus can talk Agamemnon into *reentering* the war, favor well for the rebel angels.) And if that is not enough, Milton continues the faerie elves comparison for seven lines, a technique that Shklovsky would identify as prolonging the process of perception. This defamiliarization technique takes Quintilian's ornamental *enargeia* to its extreme, but in a sophisticated manner that exposes the true nature of not only Satan, but also the other angels.

Milton's counter-simile thus defamiliarizes the rebels, using the heterogeneity of the simile to exploit faults in their heroic act of erecting pandemonium, an act that in referencing the other similes condemns it. They who vaunt and speak as if they belong among the giants of the world, "Thus to incorporeal spirits to smallest forms / Reduced."

Defamiliarization, as a grammatical rule, provides an additional means of ethical exploration and development that contributes to and works with the other rules, allowing the reader to generate an ethical position. Specifically, it draws the biases associated with certain ethical positions and characters to the forefront (Shklovsky's "bringing to view") of the narrative and provides the multiplicity necessary for moral deliberation. One can begin to see how the grammatical rules, like the classical virtues, are interrelated; "one presupposes the others" (Steadman 161).

Conclusion: Critical Egalitarianism

The grammatical rules of *Paradise Lost* are not deterministic nor are they a set of instructions, as I hope the introduction makes clear. The rules do not generate a predetermined ethical position. As rules, all that they ask of a reading is that it be grammatical. That being said, a grammar of ethics can still produce ungrammatical readings of the poem just as native speakers can at times be ungrammatical in their use of language. Ungrammatical readings nevertheless provide important positions for other readers of the poem, thereby widening the multiplicity and in the process the interpretive community, a point that Milton would see as valuable to moral education. I used Empson as an early example and I'll use him again: Empson makes all readers of his work better readers of *Paradise Lost*. He points to issues that address Satan's justification, God's wickedness, and the institution of Christianity as a whole, all aspects of the poem that the grammar itself addresses, but Empson fails to utilize. In Empson's reading of Satan and God, the attentive reader gains insight into a powerful misreading (misprision) of the grammatical rule of defamiliarization, which takes a relatively habituated object, Satan, and makes him seem not just unfamiliar, but new, as if Satan, prior to Milton's probing of his motives, was an unrealized figure. But in this newness, this defamiliarization—a slowing down and disturbing of the cognitive processes—of Satan, Empson fails to see Milton's *own* motive, which was to provide a complete hollowing out of evil from the inside (Tsur 4). This was Milton's great extension of or advancement on the satanic literature of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. By getting into Satan, that is, by providing him with interiority, Milton also exposed Satan's *exterior* as false; he makes him unfamiliar in order to hollow him out.

In the sense of generating conflicting readings, the grammar of ethics opens the poem to a sort of critical egalitarianism, an egalitarianism that does not privilege one reading over the other, but affords the means to generate strong grammatical readings (with the possibility of allowing ungrammatical readings) that push the dialogue forward, never allowing it to stagnate or atrophy. Earlier in the discussion, I mention the possibility of altering or emending the rules. The grammar of ethics, while embedded in the poem, invites such engagement and reappraisal. The rules themselves require the reader to think critically about what she experiences when reading the text. The rules are thus open to critical scrutiny, inviting new ways to improve moral thinking. That being said, the grammar of ethics permits only certain alterations, alterations that do not contradict the poem. For example, if someone were to say, I claim “atheism” to be a grammatical rule of *Paradise Lost*, which someone like Bryson might do, I would suggest that as a rule, such an emendation would not be possible or even necessary, especially since multiplicity and incertitude already include alternative claims to God’s status (or the “God issue”) in the poem. The grammar of ethics asks the reader to judge (hold up for scrutiny) God’s claim in the poem, specifically his rhetorical defense at the opening of Book 3. The grammar of ethics, as such, only works for readers who approach the poem *disinterestedly*; that is, for those who openly seek to challenge themselves and creatively think about their judgments as they evolve through the poem. As I mentioned before, some readers eschew the moral aspect of the poem altogether and read the poem with a theory or agenda in mind. Such readers will hardly notice the grammar of ethics or find little value in it.

The grammar of ethics most salient feature remains its generative quality. No other literary work of the period provides such freedom to self-fashion an ethical self. Unlike the conceptual poet Christian Bök's recent attempt to infuse a bacterium with a genetic code that is itself a poem, and which possesses a set of instructions to create another poem (a poem which is *always* the same), *Paradise Lost's* grammatical rules do not generate a premade ethical code.²⁵ The rules promote open and creative viewpoints, but viewpoints that take the rules as part of the structure of the poem.

The grammar of ethics, moreover, allows Milton to express an ethical process that avoids resorting to value-terms like good/evil, virtue/vice, truth/falsity, Classical/Christian, terms that would cause readers to automatically take sides due to preconceived notions, habits, or allegiances. Even though these terms appear and frequently dominate certain aspects of the narrative, the grammar itself does not take a position but instead puts it to the reader. Most of the grammatical rules, in fact, embody the antithetical value-terms within them. Multiplicity, choice, contrariety, incertitude, and exposure, for instance, require both sides of the "value-coin" to work. Defamiliarization and allusion both expand and subsume the value-terms, often leaving them exposed and much altered from the original portrait that the reader knows (e.g., Satan).

Milton eschews Spenser's attempt to fashion the twelve noble virtues and instead allows the reader to fashion a single one for herself; that is, a self-creative unencumbered and tried virtue (complete in itself, a sort of Platonic understanding of virtue as a unified

²⁵ Cf. Bök. "The Xenotext Works": "The Xenotext is my nine-year long attempt to create an example of "living poetry." I have been striving to write a short verse about language and genetics, whereupon I use a "chemical alphabet" to translate this poem into a sequence of DNA for subsequent implantation into the genome of a bacterium (in this case, a microbe called *Deinococcus radiodurans*, an extremophile, capable of surviving, without mutation, in even the most hostile milieu, including the vacuum of outer space).

When translated into a gene and then integrated into the cell, my poem is going to constitute a set of instructions, all of which cause the organism to manufacture a viable, benign protein in response—a protein that, according to my original, chemical alphabet, is itself yet another text."

whole), which relies on choice to determine its trajectory. Choice, which Milton on numerous occasions identifies with reason itself (“Reason is but choosing”; “Reason also is choice”), constitutes the core feature of man’s free will.²⁶ The room for creativity that Milton builds into the poem’s circumscribed grammar therefore provides the reader with choices (unrealized possibilities) based on the actions and rhetoric of the characters; choices, moreover, that develop the reader’s moral imagination. But these choices require that the reader take an ethical position and not, as the aporetic critics argue, succumb to the poem’s indeterminacy, which is part of the process and not the poem’s endgame. Incertitude, as such, would be an ungrammatical response to the poem.

The grammar of ethics that runs through *Paradise Lost* provides the “gracefull symmetry” and divine sinews of moral thinking that makes it a consummate work of ethical theory (*CPW* 2.555). The genius of Milton’s enterprise arises not from its originality, which is considerable, nor its learning, which is even more considerable, but its ethical freedom. Surprisingly, scholars have only recently come around to the fact that *Paradise Lost* is in fact a poem of openness and possibility, neither a poem of closed systems nor, as Sir Walter Raleigh claimed, a “monument to dead ideas.” Milton’s grammar of ethics, I argue, becomes a *way* (significantly the last word of the poem) of accommodating ourselves to that freedom, and more importantly for Milton, our means of “repair[ing] the ruins” of our first parents with dignity and grace (*CPW* 2.366).

²⁶ See Woods 103-143.

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