Uncircumscribed Mind
Reading Milton Deeply

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We imagine Satan milling with the crowd around the Jordan, only dimly attentive to John's declarations as he "Pretends to wash off sin" (1.73). On hearing the divine voice he twists around to stare intently at Jesus emerging from the water. Milton provides clear textual and contextual cues, so we have enough information to make a good guess at what Satan is thinking. We see in the description of his puzzled wonder his surprise pass into envy, then into rage. We sense also a rising vapor of premonition. The narrated moment of silence clearly dramatizes the character. This strategy typifies all such moments involving static characters in the poem, primarily Satan and his infernal crew, but also God and the angelic host.

An unidentified silence takes place in book 2 and involves the apostles Andrew and Simon. They have been searching for the Messiah they heard dramatically announced at the river. They have covered a good deal of ground, but haven't found him, and they are frustrated. That energy layers onto their deeper cultural yearning for relief from Roman oppression. They vent their emotion in a "choral" lament, which, inflamed with zeal, rises into a prayer, even a demand on God:

\[
\text{God of Israel,} \\
\text{Send thy Messiah forth, the time has come;} \\
\text{Behold the kings of the earth how they oppress} \\
\text{Thy chosen, to what height their power unjust} \\
\text{They have exalted, and behind them cast} \\
\text{All fear of thee; arise and vindicate} \\
\text{Thy glory, free thy people from their yoke.} \\
\text{(2.42-48)}
\]

The line that follows, "But let us wait" (2.49), abruptly reverses the direction of this energy. The apostles lack apparent motivation for the abrupt change of mood. To make sense of the shift we must search in and beyond the immediate context for an explanation.

Stanley Fish, in "Inaction and Silence: The Reader in Paradise Regained," sees in this instance and in the poem as a whole a calculated use of the decision not to act. He posits that this deliberate inaction reinforces the central message of the poem that the proper response to the very human, and hence suggestively satanic, prompting to act of one's own volition is simply not to act. The human will, the self, must "disappear," replaced by the will of the divine. The apostles here, and Mary later, do as Jesus does throughout the poem. They choose inaction as the best response to the provocation of the moment. Although
perhaps satisfying from a doctrinal point of view, the choice is very difficult poetically. Fish justifies Milton's forcing this discomfort on the reader by arguing that it demands an active alteration of reader expectation and, by so doing, reinforces the doctrinal lesson. This insight provides a rationale for the inexplicable, even automaton-like, behavior of the apostles, Mary, and Jesus. They act in ways that contrast with very normal and very human responses seemingly without motivation.

If Fish is right and their decision to wait prefigures and so reinforces what Jesus does, what evidence indicates this choice originates within them? Or is it the external, contrived manipulation of the poet? Before answering these questions, we must consider the impact of reading Paradise Regained as performance art. The poem is not a play. It lacks the necessary dramatic apparatus and has a narrative simplicity and thematic complexity that make a stage performance difficult. It should, however, be read or at least conceptualized as an oral performance. The poem is epistodic, almost scenelike, and dialogue makes up much of the text. Most significantly for my argument, Milton makes effective use of dramatic pause. As actors know very well, silence communicates. As readers/audience we may imbue silences with meaning by drawing on what we already know or believe about the character and the context. Certainly, Milton was familiar with live theater. His Latin poem to Charles Diodati (Elegia Prima) suggests he frequented the theater as a young man, and Comus and Samson Agonistes are either actual stage productions or were conceptualized as theater.

We may apply Fish's insight in accounting for the apostles' and Mary's odd behavior by creating space and time for the emergence of motivation. We may do this in performance by prolonging the normal end of line pause immediately after "arise and vindicate / Thy glory, free thy people from their yoke." If it is held longer than is comfortable, the delay cues the listener/reader to expect some shift in the apostles' frame of mind. When vocalized, the apostles' complaint rings out in the cottage, then dies away into its own echo. Silence follows; a lack of an answer; a response of nonresponse. On the edge of the耳机 in the contrasting quiet murmurs is the almost inaudible sound of "winds with reeds, and osiers whisp'ring" (2.26). This line contrasts powerfully with the accumulated frustration of the search. The pause dissipates the enthusiasm of the apostles' appeal. The hesitation cautions us to consider the thoughts of Andrew and Simon. We know where they begin, and we know where they end. What we do not know is how they got from one point to the other. A pause, a silence, accents the need for reflection on the oddity of their choice. A parallel to "Sonnet 16, On His Blindness" is striking here. The word "yoke" in Paradise Regained refers to the Roman occupation. "[P]atience" (8) in the sonnet uses it to refer to the trials borne in any life by the individual Christian and reminds the complaining voice in the sonnet, presumably Milton, that "who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best" (10–11). This act of "hearing" answers the question of what is to be done. The apostles as well as Milton must simply "stand and wait" (14).

Once alerted to the use of these silences, we can locate them throughout the poem. Their prevalence and variety invite a closer look. Of four categories, the first, a silence of realization, occurs when a recognition and understanding of a larger truth dominates an emotional moment. This occurs typically when a character or group realizes the significance of an event. One example of this kind of silence takes place when the angelic host first grasps the sublimity of Jesus's mission, as God reveals it to them. This takes place in an identified moment of hesitation:

So spake the Eternal Father, and all Heaven
Admiring stood a space, then into hymns
Burst forth, and in celestial measures moved,
Circling the throne and singing, while the hand
Sung with the voice, and this the argument.

(1.168–72; emphasis mine)

Milton narrates the angels' moment of silence. The imagery here is almost comic. The angels cluster around God as he explains his plan to Gabriel. They look mutely at one another in dumbfounded appreciation of its sublimity, then suddenly burst into song and flight. Interpreting this moment requires little nontextual information, though traditional angel iconography adds a touch of visual humor Milton may or may not have intended.

A second example of a silence of realization occurs during Mary's meditation. Milton does not clearly identify this pause in the text. We must infer it from Mary's abrupt emotional change of direction. Jesus has not come home and Mary is worried:

Within her breast, though calm; her breast though pure,
Motherly cares and fears got head, and raised
Some troubled thoughts, which she in sighs thus clad.

(2.63–65)
She reflects on her past and on Jesus's life with her, and in particular on the prophecy of pain appointed to her. She ends her reflection admirably in a resigned acceptance: "Afflicted I may be, it seems, and blest; / I will not argue that, nor will repine" (93–94). Nevertheless, her humanity overcomes her discipline and she asks, "But where delays he now?" (95). Her consolatory answer follows immediately, "some great intent / Conceals him" (95–96). Even for Mary, the Mother of God, the change here is too quick to be satisfactory. The emotional sense demands some hesitation. It begins a dramatic pause long enough for the wheels of her heart and her head to revolve to the proper answer. Although Mary afterward justifies her complacency by remembering the last time Jesus was missing, the initial rapidity with which she consoles herself becomes more acceptable and powerful if we pause to imagine her thought process. It might run something like this: "Why didn't he call to say he was going to be late? He is probably lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Well, maybe not. But if not, he's going to hear about it when he gets home. What could be keeping him if not an accident? It had better be important. It's not like him just to take off like this. The last time he pulled this was with that business at the temple, all that arguing with the scribes. Of course, if this is anything like that, it probably is important, especially after what happened at the river. It must be something like that. It is. I'm sure of it, or I would have heard from him." "[S]ome great intent / Conceals him" (95–96). If we pause in the reading, we give Mary a moment to process all this, a moment to realize that Jesus's disappearance marks a pivotal moment in the divine plan. A full stop intensifies the significance, and it calls attention to the bitterness of the moment. She has not been unmindful of her own prophecy of pain. Nevertheless, she concludes that she must wait, with "patience . . . inured" (102), for whatever will come. Her choice is less simple and automatic than the syntax initially suggests.

The whole poem drives toward its most significant realization, Jesus's full recognition of his divinity. For Jesus this realization confirms both his identity and his mission. For Satan it confirms Jesus as the Christ. The epic climaxes in a single line and the act of standing up. What follows should be a moment of suspenseful silence. Instead, Milton charges on into somewhat anticlimactic comparison of Satan's fall with "Earth's son Antaeus" (4.563) and "that Théban monster" (572). The lack of narrative attention to Jesus's act understates its significance, not in doctrinal, but in human terms. The moment is climactic, but it passes without attention to the suspense it contains. This suggests Jesus's action entailed no risk. The implication is that he knew he would not fall. He might simply be standing up to finally get rid of Satan whose persistence had become tiresome. Inserting a silence immediately after the climactic line, however, emphasizes a different interpretation. A dramatic pause implies the outcome of his action is not a given. Jesus does not know. His stepping up, then, becomes a complete act of faith, a final sacrifice of the self, without surety. The silence begins in suspense and concludes in confirmation. In it, Jesus's balance is established and his divinity confirmed; his offering of self is accepted, and Satan's eyes and mind are opened to the full realization of what until this point he has willfully doubted. Then Satan should fall. Inserting a silence here highlights and intensifies the moment in which these realizations dawn.

A second category of silences, those of diminution, involve moments in which the accumulated energy or emotion from the preceding rhetoric drains away. One example of these is Satan's request of Jesus for his permission to visit. Satan represents Jesus's granting his request as a bestowing of gentle grace on an undeserving reprobate. Satan's particularly sly twist here involves wrapping the temptation in an outward form of good manners. Jesus's direct refusal grants the moral ear in its violation of the custom of hospitality. Additionally, Satan's silky tone exerts an undeniable emotional pull. Inserting a pause just before the narrative transition to Jesus's dialogue provides a moment in which this emotional power may evaporate. After Satan finishes his request, "disdain not such access to me" (1.492), Jesus should wait and allow Satan's smirking "humility" to become self-conscious. After a long, progressively more uncomfortable hesitation, we can imagine Satan breaking the tension first with an exasperated "What?" before:

our Saviour with unaltered brow [says]
Thy coming hither, though I know thy scope,
I bid not or forbid; do as thou findst
Permission from above; thou canst not more.

(493–96)

Prolonging the pause gives the machinery of the diabolical time to show through the fabric cover, the bones to show through the thin skin. Jesus's quiet, noncommittal, and apt response then contrasts less with Satan's appeal since the emotional energy has drained from it.

The following moment just before Satan's magician-like dissimulation also benefits from an inserted silence. We can imagine a long mo-
ment of eye contact as the two opponents conclude the first day’s tentative conflict. They stare at each other for a long, intense silence; then Satan with mock dignity snaps forward at the waist and dissolves like the validity of his arguments into a gray mist. This imaginative, dramatic rendering interprets and intensifies the subtext, the doctrinal message tucked into Jesus’s enigmatic responses. It must be God, not Satan, who frames the argument.

A second appeal in which silences effectively inform the action is the temptation of the feast. Satan’s spread of meat and drink, proffered by the fair and beautiful, accompanies his evocative appeal:

All these are Spirits of air, and woods, and springs,
Thy gentle ministers, who come to pay
Thee homage, and acknowledge thee their Lord:
What doubt’st thou Son of God? Sit down and eat.

(2.374–77)

In addition to the sensual imagery playing on the awakening of physical hunger in Jesus, Satan employs his voice with its mellifluous, compelling, and companionable tone urging acceptance of his invitation. Milton describes Jesus’s reply as temperate (378), but that sense of temperance becomes more effective if it does not follow immediately. A silence inserted just after “sit down and eat” and held just long enough to be uncomfortable reduces the pull of Satan’s appeal. The sense of expectation begins to ebb when the appeal fails to produce the expected rush of acquiescence. Satan here plays the role of affectionate host urging a guest to stay for a meal. A reluctance to impose or to change plans restrains the guest, but the host insists, and so he wavers. Then, he assents, and the polite tension disperses in a rush of warm cordiality. In this instance, however, the hospitality is specious. Jesus observes this and ignores the pressure. More significantly, he neither accepts nor directly refuses the offer as Satan represents it. Instead, he exposes the fallacy behind the offer. It is tempting to imagine him lifting one of the silver serving covers and asking Satan, “Isn’t this the chicken and pickles that were in my refrigerator?” Inserting a silence just after “sit down and eat” accentuates the incongruity of the expectation and alerts us to look hard at our initial acceptance of the way Satan packages his appeal.

The third form of silence, the silence of recovery, belongs entirely to Satan. Milton clearly identifies when one of these occurs in the text, typically following Satan’s confession and rebuke. They take the form of suspended dialogue during which Satan, at first stunned by a failure, reformulates his pitch and responds. They follow from the fact that Satan’s efforts, however subtle and devious, are always extemporaneous. In the beginning, he tells his diabolical council:

His first begot we know, and sore have felt,
When his fierce thunder drove us to the deep;
Who this is we must learn, for man he seems
In all his lineaments, though in his face
The glimpses of his Father’s glory shine.

(1.89–93)

He does not yet know his opponent, so he cannot fully prepare a means of attack. After his first exploratory attempt, he tells his minions, “[I] have found him, viewed him, tasted him” (2.131). He has taken the measure of his opponent and come away impressed. He admits to his infernal crew that he is unsure of success. Jesus will require, he says, “Far other labour to be undergone / Than when I dealt with Adam first of men” (132–33), and this labor will involve operating from a shifting base. This approach intensifies the moments that follow each failure. Satan’s reaction, usually identified with a spare adjective, is followed by a described hesitation before he renews the assault. Unlike the implied hesitations I call attention to when interpreting the acts of Jesus, the apostles, and Mary, Milton narrates these pauses. After the appeal to wealth at the end of the second book, Satan experiences a significant setback. The third book begins with his silence of reaction and recovery:

So spake the Son of God, and Satan stood
A while as mute, confounded what to say,
What to reply, confounded and convinced
Of his weak arguing, and fallacious drift.

(3.1–4)

It is only after a long moment that he, “At length collecting all his Serpent wiles” (5), renews the attempt. Milton identifies this waiting period and gives it substantial textual reinforcement. Satan gets six full lines to catch his breath. A longer recovery period follows the rebuff at the end of book 3. At the beginning of book 4, Satan spends twenty-four lines in “shameful silence” (22), as the narrator comments on the futility of his persistence. Then, instead of speaking, he acts. He
abruptly spirits Jesus off to the mountainside. Milton relays another nineteen lines of description before Satan gets his voice back. These silences require little imaginative speculation because they reinforce rather than contradict reader expectation. Satan's frustrated silences do not bewilder us. In fact, in his behavior we see a disturbingly familiar reflection. Satan does what we would do. He constructs compelling pleas that subtly misrepresent the truth or misplace the point in order to fulfill a deeply personal desire. In each case, Jesus exposes Satan's distortions and reorients his misplaced priorities. We find Satan's moments of silence understandable because they resemble our own. After Jesus rejects the pursuit of glory for himself, saying “I seek not mine, but his / Who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am” (3.106–7), Satan responds in a telling murmur, “Think not so slight of glory” (109). Milton’s use of the word “murmuring” here conveys not only the sense of speaking softly, but also that of complaint. For Satan this temptation is personal. In this way it resembles the “murmur” (9) in “Sonnet 16.” Both complaints spring from a deeply personal desire. Milton reinforces the personal quality of this temptation for Satan when Jesus finishes his dismissal of the appeal:

Satan had not to answer, but stood struck
With guilt of his own sin, for he himself
Insatiable of glory had lost all.

(3.146–48)

Satan’s sin, the aggrandizement of self, is of a kind with Eve’s. His murmur might be ours, and his regret resonates with our own. We need not strain our imagination much when looking in the mirror.

Jesus has a different relationship to silence when it involves only him, and his moments of silence suggest a more dynamic character than earlier critics generally recognize. Admittedly Jesus’s demeanor is not particularly engaging. Milton indicates his taciturn emotions with spare adjectives tucked into the introductions to his responses. Generally, Jesus is “unmoved,” “calm,” or “stern,” although in one moment of unrestrained enthusiasm, he becomes “fervent.” These barren descriptors suggest a Jesus simply going through the motions, confident of himself and of his ultimate success. A closer look at books 1 and 2, however, reveals several suggestively human impulses disturbing his divine self-control. As Mary and the apostles did before him, Jesus experiences silences of realization and acceptance.

The first such silence occurs during his initial investigation into his identity. In fact, his whole trip into the wilderness cultivates a silence within which to discover who and what he is as well as the direction of his mission. It is not, however, as quiet as it appears. An internal noise besets him:

O what a multitude of thoughts at once
Awakened in me swarm, while I consider
What from within I feel myself, and hear
What from without comes often to my ears
Ill sorting with my present state compared.

(1.196–200)

He reviews what he has been told, has read, and how he has responded to the promptings of his heart. He recalls a time when zeal for his people “flamed in [his] heart” (216) and how that energy passed from a compulsion to act with force to a decision to rely instead on persuasion as the “more humane, the more Heavenly” means (221). His thought here is clearly grounded in an earthly and historical frame of reference. His choice is not inexplicable. Certainly the human as well as the divine may value persuasion over violence. Yet the decision seems almost arbitrary. It lacks evident emotional justification. A hesitation inserted after “Till truth were freed, and equity restored” and before “Yet held” highlights the moment in which his emotional zeal cools and his reason or divine insight asserts itself (1.220–21). Jesus speaks in retrospect here, and the dramatic sense appropriate to a reflection differs from that of more immediate narration. Still, hesitating emphasizes the human quality of the moment. Jesus feels the tug of competing desires and the need to make a choice. Though subtle, this quiet, minor crisis humanizes Jesus. Inserting the silence calls attention to a moment easily missed, especially in a silent reading.

Jesus then recalls his mother’s words and what he found in looking to the Scriptures for guidance. Another pause for dramatic effect powerfully reinforces his discovery. Jesus has looked himself up in the library. We can imagine him peering intently into a sacred scroll then looking up suddenly. He has “saw’d of whom they spake / I am” (262–63). Lingering a moment before “I am” adds weight to the line. It draws attention to Jesus’s comprehension that he is the one prophesied. For the temporal, human Jesus, this is an epiphany. The natural rhythm of reading pushes past this moment at nearly the same rate as any other, but an attentive reader may, even should, hesitate, pacing
the lead-in line so the vocal (even if read silently) punch intensifies the biblical echo “I am.”

A third silence of realization in this sequence follows the line, “whose sins / Full weight must be transferred upon my head. / Yet neither thus disheartened or dismayed, the time prefixed I waited” (266–68). The enormity of the first line, that upon his head must fall the weight of all earthly sin, makes his comment in the next line seem either offhand or surreal. At the very least, he should first swallow hard. If not, we lose the sense of his humanity and our affinity with him in a divine but inaccessible radiance. A hesitation here, the taking of a breath, a sigh of mute resignation, serves to keep him close, keep him human enough to make it possible to imitate him as well as admire him. Jesus loses something when he rises preternaturally above human response. In a hesitation, we can empathize with the human struggle behind his acceptance.

Another silence of realization occurs when his reminiscences move forward to the present, to his journey into the wilderness:

And now by some strong motion I am led
Into this wilderness, to what intent?
I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know.
(290–92)

Inserting a strong hesitation between “yet” and “perhaps” expands the normal weight of the comma and calls attention to the following line, “For what concerns my knowledge God reveals” (294), which identifies the key to Jesus's orientation to the Father. Jesus grounds all his counterarguments to Satan’s appeals in this acceptance on faith of the unseen Father's will. He accepts that a divine intent exists, but remains hidden. He recognizes his initial desire to know and understand originates in self-will. The hesitation here highlights his realization that this human desire exists independent of the need dictated by the Father. He then accepts the uncomfortable position he occupies, in doing so modeling a kind of ultimate negative capability. A similar acceptance occurs in book 2. Jesus’s humanity again asserts itself in a moment when he makes a choice, a moment readily intensified by a silence. The forty days have passed, and Jesus feels hunger for the first time. More significantly, he has found no further direction or explanation. In mild exasperation he asks himself, “Where will this end?” (245). The complex syntax of the following lines obscures somewhat the consequence this fast has for him. Clearly, though, the pangs of human hunger give him pause and require some reconciliation with his faith:

But now I feel I hunger, which declares,
Nature hath need of what she asks; yet God
Can satisfy that need some other way,
Though hunger still remain: so it remain
Without this body's wasting, I content me,
And from the sting of famine fear no harm.
(252–57)

A pause just after “she asks” and before “yet” emphasizes his intellectual and spiritual assessment of, “Now what do I do? I'm starving.” The human response is “I am hungry, and I want to eat.” The divine response is “Though I am hungry, my body does not waste away. The hunger for the will of God must take precedence. Since God is providing against the natural consequences of hunger, I will wait—even if I am still really, really hungry.” A silence here calls attention to his brief struggle in accepting the will of the Father. We expect Jesus to come to this conclusion. He is, after all, Jesus. However, for the reader his act of acceptance becomes more compelling if even he has to think about it.

In the end his “thinking about it” informs my argument for the selective insertion and dramatic interpretation of silences into the text. The silences themselves do not explain the apparent discontinuities in the narrative. Silence as an interpretive device depends on assumptions about the poem, and we use our guesses at Milton's intentions and broader contextual and thematic understandings to fill the empty space. Emotional discontinuities prompt questions, and the pursuit of their answers ultimately resolves into the larger question that the poem asks: how may Paradise be regained? This, in turn, links to how it was lost in the first place and how that might be reversed. Eve’s taking of the apple at the prompting of the serpent was ultimately an act of selfishness, a choice of self over God. It recapitulates Satan’s great sin. Satan’s famous declaration from book 1 of Paradise Lost, “To reign is worth ambition though in Hell; / Better to reign in hell, than serve in Heav’n” (262–63), elevates the will of the self over that of the Father. For Satan, the prince of deceit, this act constitutes the original self-deception. His rejection of the primacy of God for the primacy of self inverts the proper relationship of created to creator. He fails to trust, fails to believe that acceptance of the will of God will provide ful-
fillment of self rather than the loss of it. Satan fears that by making the divine preeminent, the self will be subsumed. Jesus demonstrates that, paradoxically, the relinquishing of the self does not result in the disappearance of individual personhood.

In making this claim, I disagree with Fish who sees the individual Jesus disappearing in the climactic and ambiguous line, “To whom thus Jesus: also it is written, / Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said and stood” (4.560–61). According to Fish, the “he” of the human and individuated Jesus vanishes into the “He” of the divine through a complete abandonment of the individual self. I suggest rather that this act constitutes a fulfillment of self, a radiation or an amplification of the original human self now fully imbued with or infused by the divine. This commingling and intensifying of the self’s potential only becomes possible in a willing displacement of the self from the center, from the locus of control. This requires a human leap of faith, a leap made by a coherent human self acting without surety. As Lewalski points out, Satan’s first temptation, to turn stones into bread, is not one of hunger but one of distrust. In the end, so is the final temptation. In casting himself down, Jesus would have presumed upon, tested, the divine, and any test is rooted not in faith but in doubt. Such an act insists on a demonstration of divine power as justification for faith. Jesus refuses this final temptation as he did the first. In stepping up, Jesus trusts. In the pause that follows, the Father confirms that trust by accepting Jesus’s gift of self. Satan realizes not only the divinity of Jesus, but also the failure of his own strategy. In clutching the self, Satan loses it. In surrendering the self, Jesus possesses it in abundance.

To regain Paradise, Milton’s Jesus must reestablish the proper order of priorities. This task underlies all the major and minor conflicts in the poem. In each case, the principal characters stand and wait rather than assert their will independent of divine direction. Silences of realization, diminution, and acceptance help to counter the natural rhythm of the silently read text and provide for a dramatic interpretation that emphasizes the human struggle these choices involve. Criticism of the poem’s static characters and their lack of energy may be offset somewhat by a sensitive reading that makes effective use of intentional hesitations and of meaningful silences. An interpretive understanding of the doctrinal issues that Milton addresses in the poem, and the application of those understandings to the literal oral “reading” of the work, can use the device of silence, of hesitation, of significant pause, to tease out the implications, the meaning of the work.