Uncircumscribed Mind
Reading Milton Deeply

Edited by
Charles W. Durham and
Kristin A. Pruitt

Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press
To Annabel Patterson,
whose wit and wisdom delight and enlighten

33. Exodus 14:4–8 describes the hardening of Pharaoh's heart but with no explicit reference to signs or wonders.


*It has often been claimed that Milton's *Paradise Lost* portrays, concomitant with the Fall of Eve and Adam, a fall of language. I shall argue here, to the contrary, not that Eve's taking the fruit leads to fallen language, but rather that the disobedient act derives in part from a fall into language, which the poem presents as an inherently unstable medium. This view of language is illuminated by Milton's comments, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, on another kind of token, the Eucharist; the same view is illustrated poetically in the Temptation sequence, the conversation between Satan and Eve prior to the Fall. Moreover, given the presence of language before and after the Fall, this view of language as inherently unstable perhaps informs the tragic sense pervading the poem's portrayal of mankind's Fall: namely, the visiting of catastrophic consequences on behavior that appears somehow inevitable.

In book 1, chapter 28 of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton observes that, when Jesus spoke the Words of Institution ("those words of Take, eat, this is my body,") he intended these words as a "trope, or a figurative usage of speech" ([*opus sive usus loquendi figuratus*]; the Roman tradition, however, misled by the "utmost connection between sign and thing signified" ([*inter signum et rem signatum ratio summa*]), conflates them (*WJM* 16:198; *CPW* 6:555). The Roman reading of the copulative *is* in the Institution, not as meaning "figures" or "represents" but taken literally, underlies the doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the eucharistic wafer is Christ's body *re vera* ("actually"—etymologically: the *res vera*; *WJM*, 16:210, 198; *CPW*, 6:559, 555).*
Milton, word and wafer alike are cut off from their figurative content and assigned a dangerous autonomy.

Milton's discussion of the Eucharist in *De Doctrina* constitutes a comprehensive attack on the doctrine of Real Presence; Milton argues instead for a dualistic opposition between the Eucharist and the body of Christ—between matter and spirit, corporeal and incorporeal. Recent studies of the place of Milton's eucharistic theory in the poetics of *Paradise Lost* have focused, for obvious reasons, on a passage that seems to imply a very different conception: namely, Raphael's meal with Adam and Eve in book 5. Here is the one occurrence in the poem of the word *transubstantiate*, used moreover in reference to a meal shared by man and spirit.

So down they sat,
And to their viands fell, nor seemingly
The angel, nor in mist, the common gloss
Of theologians, but with keen despatch
Of real hunger, and concoctive heat
To transubstantiate.

(5.433–38)

In light of Milton's fervent opposition to the Roman Mass, Raphael's "real hunger," his transubstantiation of earthly "viands," is surprising. Both John King and Regina Schwartz have highlighted the liturgical allusions in the *table and naked ministering* attending this meal (5.443–44), as opposed to the railed altars and priestly vestments of the Laudian church. This revision of the Roman concept of transubstantiation is sandwiched between a pair of disquisitions made by Raphael, evoking the "consubstantiality" of matter and spirit on a cosmic level:

and food alike those pure
Intelligental substances require.
As doth your rational; and both contain
Within them every lower faculty
Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste,
Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,
And corporeal to incorporeal turn.

(407–13)

Further, Raphael instructs,

one almighty is, from whom
All things proceed, and up to him return,
If not deprived from good, created all
Such to perfection, one first matter all,
Induced with various forms, various degrees
Of substance, and in things that live, of life;
But more refined, more spiritual, and pure,
As nearer to him placed or nearer tending
Each in their several active spheres assigned,
Till body up to spirit work.

(469–78)

This vision of the ultimate reconciliation of matter and spirit—illustrating a doctrine Stephen Fallon has termed "animist materialism"—would seem to offer an alternative to Roman doctrine, "transforming" the notion of transubstantiation "from the popish canniblastic rite . . . into a different conceptual possibility: the entire universe is ceaselessly engaged in transforming substances, in turning into God."

John Utech has argued that the monism so richly evoked in Raphael's speech is incompatible with the "absolute separation of matter and spirit" implicit in Milton's discussion of the Eucharist in *De Doctrina.* But does philosophical assent to monism imply that (in Regina Schwartz's cannily disingenuous statement) "the body of God would surely be in the wafer and the wine too"? Milton contends that the Roman conceptions of "consubstantiation, transubstantiation, and the Papist αὐθεντικός" are "utterly alien to sacred teaching [that is, scriptural revelation] . . . [and] to the ordinary custom of speech" (*a doctrina sacra . . . a communis vocabuli . . . alienissimae*; *WJ*, 16:198; *CPW*, 6:555). Evidently Milton understands the sacrament according to the classical linguistic opposition between sign and referent; the doctrine of transubstantiation he dismisses as an accretion, a human tradition. The dualism in Milton's discussion of the Eucharist in *De Doctrina* thus belongs to the realm of sign-theory; the monism evoked in the poem to that of cosmogony. Mankind creates signs, God the cosmos: Milton would have recognized the confusion of the two categories as an old error: "Your turning of *devises* shalt it not be esteemed as the potters clay? for shall the worke say of him that made it, He made me not?" (Isa. 29:16). The Roman Mass assigns the eucharistic sign the self-sufficiency of the idol, the human "device" that asserts an impious autonomy.
Milton pursues this idolatrous elevation of the sign, polemically in De Doctrina and dramatically in Paradise Lost. Satan’s temptation of Eve in book 9 alludes suggestively to what Milton called the “Missa Papista”; the parallel suggests that theological polemic and poetic drama might be read as facets of a single, comprehensive project. In De Doctrina, Milton defines his notion of the Eucharist, in conformity with Huldrych Zwingli’s Reformist denial of Real Presence: “since every sacrament is a seal [obsignatio] of the covenant of grace, it is evident that the Papists err, attributing to the external sign [externo signo] the power—by the effect of its operation [ex opere operato], as they say—to work salvation or grace: for the sacraments by their own action confer neither salvation nor grace, but only seal or represent [vel obsignant vel repraesentant] both for believers” (WJM, 16:200; CPW, 6:556). This opposition between secondary signification (Latin signum and its derivatives) and intrinsic operation reappears in Paradise Lost. The “interdicted” fruit is consistently described as strictly a “sign” (4.428) or “pledge” (3.95) of obedience; the “effect of its operation” is something very different, as becomes clear following the transgression (9.101ff.). When Satan, in the form of the proverbially rapacious cornorant, perches on the Tree of Life, the narrator makes a point regarding the misuse of that tree that again suggests a sacramental reference:

nor on the virtue thought
Of that life-giving plant, but only used
For prospect, what well used had been the pledge
Of immortality.

(4.198–201)

There is firm distinction here between the intrinsic potency of a sacred thing and the various uses and misuses to which it may be put; clearly the potency is not essential to the thing itself, the “external sign,” but depends on an interaction between the “pledge” and the right intention of the participant. The narrator goes on to allegorize the image of Satan’s misuse of this “pledge,” in such a way as to suggest a contemporary relevance for the distinction between “best things” and their use or abuse:

So little knows
Any, but God alone, to value right
The good before him, but perverts best things
To worst abuse, or to their meanest use.

(201–4)

The narrator turns Satan himself into a sign here, a figure of general theological error. The words “worst abuse” and “meanest use” in reference to this “pledge of immortality” recall Milton’s description of the implications of Roman belief in the Real Presence: for the communion bread to become the flesh of Christ would mean that the ceremony—following Christ’s vile crucifixion and exaltation to the right hand of the Father—has “dragged back” (retrahit) Christ’s flesh to “a state of humiliation more disgraceful and wretched [misericorem atte indignatum] than before” (WJM, 16:212–13; CPW, 6:560). Investing the sacramental sign with recapitulation of Christ’s bodily experience of disgrace and wretchedness would indeed demean His presence. Satan’s abuse of this “pledge” thus parallels neatly Milton’s diagnosis of Roman eucharistic error.

Satan ministers the fruit to Eve in terms that recall the specific form of communion Milton attributes to Roman doctrine in De Doctrina: Satan tempts Eve with ascension to the rank of goddess through ingestion of an object whose intrinsic character he consistently emphasizes. In the “Papist Mass,” the “very flesh” (caro vera) of Christ, the res itself, is ingested (WJM, 16:194; CPW, 6:553). Similarly, Satan emphasizes the material aspect of the forbidden fruit: he claims that as the serpent he previously perceived nothing “but food . . . / Or sex,” so that his initial perception of the fruit was but of “a savoury odour blown. / Grateful to appetite”—answering, by wicked coincidence, to Eve’s noon-time “eager appetite” (9,573–74, 579–80, 739–40); likewise, the formerly “abject” serpent “apprehended nothing high,” so that his taking of the fruit represented nothing more than a physical climb to branches “high from ground”—a height belonging properly, as he notes, to Eve’s “utmost reach or Adam’s” (572, 574, 590–91). Another ascension, to divinity through “participating godlike food” (717), furnishes the capstone of Satan’s indoctrination of Eve and recalls the eucharistic context even more explicitly. Satan’s emphasis of the intrinsic character of the fruit obscures the contradiction in Eve’s imagining of what “participation” with God might mean: taking the fruit, she flatly opposes the deity that she imagines will be “communicated” by it (735). This is much the kind of contradiction asserted in the Reformers’ criticism of the Roman Mass: the doctrine of transubstantiation inculcates complete indifference as to the inner state of the communicant—“real presence” functions ex opere operato regardless of who ingests (whence Reformers’ repeated and indignant references to nibbling church mice.)

Eve takes and eats a sign that
she no longer perceives as a sign but as a vividly material thing, possessing an intrinsic, mystical operatsum disassociated from its ostensible frame of reference. Pulled free, in other words, from reference to God’s law, the palpably, “really” present fruit, it seems to Eve, operates autonomously.

This eucharistic travesty has a linguistic dimension: that is, this negative image of eucharistic usus is translated into a usus loquendi. In his role as pontifical surrogate, Satan has to detach the fruit from its meaning, obedience, by emphasizing its intrinsic properties, both physical and mystical. This recalls Milton’s contention that Roman eucharistic doctrine collapses the res signata into the signum (Christ’s flesh into its token) and so strips the Eucharist of its properly tropic reference. In the Temptation, Satan exposes language’s lack of determinate meaning—which is to say, in the prelapsarian context, he exposes the lack of naturalness in putatively natural language. Satan effects this primarily by means of the figure antanaclasis, the repetition of the same word in differing senses. By definition, exact homonyms worry the notion of natural language, and the figure antanaclasis points up this tension by juxtaposing homonyms in close proximity to one another, urging polyvalence on the presumptively stable connection between word and meaning. Absent a fixed frame of reference, meaning becomes contingent, dependent on context.

This verbal affectation is emblematized by the body of Satan’s chosen vehicle, the serpent. Satan’s selection of this creature is so fitting as to strain credulity in God’s (or the Son’s) statement that the serpent, along with the rest of Creation, is “entirely good” (7.549). Nevertheless, if a head “well stored with subtle wiles” might not seem uncomplicatedly good, at least it is “not nocent” (9.184, 186; cf. 7.498). In the event, the serpent’s body, a “labyrinth of many a round self-rolled” (183)—the “fold above fold” of a body that “floated redundant” (499, 503)—provides a figure of Satan’s way of speaking to Eve. As in the figure of antanaclasis, Satan consistently repeats words, in differing senses, eventually bringing Eve, on the brink of her Fall, to do the same. Repetition of the same, reiteration, redundancy are the master figures of this style of speech, as they are the physical characteristics of the snake’s body, and this verbal redundancy has a corrosive effect on the semantic confidence associated with natural language. Satan evokes this kind of pernicious verbal redundancy with reference to a series of key words, in an effort to lodge a conceptual wedge between prohibition and choice.

The first word Satan speaks to Eve, “wonder,” illustrates this process. “Wonder not” is itself a kind of prohibition, which, however, is immediately undermined, and not only by the conditional “if perhaps / Thou canst,” but also, and more strikingly, by the repetition of the word in the middle of the following line: “who art sole wonder” (532–33). “Wonder” in the first instance is synonymous with “be struck with surprise” and bears the negative connotation of “arm / Thy looks,” its coordinate in the following clause (533–34); both the wondering and the arming are things not to be done. Yet in the second instance the word’s sense is entirely positive or appreciative. “Wonder” is a verb, then it is a noun; it is something not to be done then it is something singularly to be admired; it is something Eve might do, it is something Eve is. Taken as a group, these equivocations suggest that the word’s meaning is indeterminate, a question of context. Given that it is his intention all along to bring Eve to ignore his “Wonder not,” Satan has here his first success overturning a prohibition. In this instance the prohibition is of his own invention and seems rather innocuous; he will go on to widen the scope of his rhetoric until it encompasses another prohibition, that of God Himself.

John Leonard has framed the verbal dimension of the Temptation as a “contest between Satan and Eve for mastery and interpretation of the natural language.” Throughout their dialogue, the two do indeed pass key words back and forth—words such as “God,” “death,” and “evil”—each asserting his or her own constructions. In Eve’s response to Satan’s opening sally, it is “wonder” that explains her desire to hear more: “such wonder claims attention due” (566). Significantly, Eve’s “wonder” has a double aspect: it is an objective description of the “miracle” of the serpent’s becoming “speakable of mute” (562, 563); at the same time it coyly acknowledges the admiration with which the serpent has so copiously plied her, “thou . . . / To me so friendly grown” (563–64). Not only does Eve take up one of the key words in Satan’s initial speech, and not only does she make it a key word in her response, but she uses that word with the kind of equivocation that Satan has tried to inculcate. The equivocation casts a shadow on Eve’s integrity, as she quietly folds the effect the serpent’s praise has had on her into surprise at his speaking at all; this anticipates her response to his next barrage of hyperbolic laudatives:

Serpent, thy overpraising leaves in doubt
The virtue of that fruit, in thee first proved:
But say, where grows the tree [7]

(615–17)

Despite the supercilious check, "yet more amazed unwar" Eve is ready to follow (9.614).\textsuperscript{33} Satan might well laugh at her attempt to maintain appearances. On seeing the tree at issue, however, Eve arranges the process, taking up the word "wonder" yet again and this time defining it unequivocally as a thing requiring restraint: "Wondrous indeed, if cause of such effects. / But of this tree we may not taste nor touch" (650–51). This firm assertion follows Eve's initial response to the Tree, a demurring double-entendre, which Fowler has suggested, shows Eve "[e]liminating the serpent's wordplaying style"\textsuperscript{34} "our coming hither, / Fruitless to me, though fruit be here to excess" (647–48). Certainly neither she nor Adam has said anything like this before. Nevertheless, the play is innocent: there is self-conscious levity in it, but no speciousness. Eve does not try to collapse one meaning into another or otherwise sophisticate. If there is something of the mere serpent's redundant subterfuge here, Eve, as we have seen, at once puts the restraints on "wonder" that Satan has been trying to loosen.\textsuperscript{27}

Satan immediately takes up the word with which Eve toys, turning her playful equivocation to pernicious obsfuscation: "Hath God then said that of the fruit / Of all these garden trees ye shall not eat?" (656–57). The fruit of this tree, of all the trees—what fruit? Countering this effort to confuse the meaning of the word, Eve proceeds to carefully distinguish one fruit from another:

Of the fruit
Of each tree in the garden we may eat,
But of the fruit of this fair tree amidst
The garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat
Thereof, nor ye touch it, lest ye die.

(659–63; emphasis mine)

This use of antanaclasis corresponds to Quintilian's definition of how the figure may be employed with "better propriety" (\textit{elegantius}): "in distinguishing among aspects of the referent" (\textit{proprietate rei}).\textsuperscript{26} In fixing the meanings of one word, however, Eve only provides her opponent with more crucial verbal targets for his duplicitous rhetoric. In anticipation of this speech, the serpent rises to full height "in himself collected" (673); Fowler paraphrases "in control of himself,"\textsuperscript{27} but this ignores the particulars of the bodily form that Satan has adopted and,

more specifically, the echo of the serpent's "many a round self-rolled" (183). Visually speaking, Satan is "self-raised" (5.860)—on a pillar of redoubled self. The comparison to an orator who has risen to speak recalls Belial's puns conflating physical matter with the matter of rhetorical discourse (6.621–22, 624) and suggests the verbal dimension of the temptation that Satan is now to bring to a head. The purpose of this onslaught is to worry the words underlying the Prohibition, beginning with "death."

\begin{center}
\underline{do not believe}
\end{center}

Those rigid threats of \textit{death}; ye shall not \textit{die}:
How should ye?

\begin{center}
\underline{whom the pain}
\end{center}

Of \textit{death} denounced, whatever thing \textit{death} be,
Deterred not from achieving what might lead
To happier life

\begin{center}
\underline{So ye shall \textit{die} perhaps, by putting off}
\end{center}

Human, to put on \textit{gods}, \textit{death} to be wished.

(684–86, 694–97, 713–14; emphasis mine)

\textit{Death} is variously a thing threatened and denounced, a thing to be welcomed, a thing that will not happen, a thing that may well happen, and a thing with no clear meaning.\textsuperscript{33} The third passage above is part of another series of equivocations—around the word "\textit{God}."

\begin{center}
\underline{will \textit{God} incense his ire}
\end{center}

For such a petty trespass

\begin{center}
\underline{\textit{God} therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just;}
\end{center}

Not just, not \textit{God};

\begin{center}
\underline{and ye shall be as \textit{gods},}
\end{center}

Knowing both good and evil as they know.
That ye should be as \textit{gods}, since I as man,
Internal man, is but proportion meet,
I of brute human, ye of human \textit{gods}.
So ye shall die perhaps, by putting off
Human, to put on \textit{gods},

\begin{center}
\underline{And what are \textit{gods} that man may not become}
\end{center}
As they, participating godlike food?  
The gods are first.  
(692–93, 700–701, 708–14, 716–18;  
emphasis mine)

Most prominently, Satan draws the latter word from monotheistic to polytheistic reference, from God to gods—a singularly momentous equivocation (though one fraught with ambiguity, considering Milton's anti-Trinitarianism). The word is also subject to constant, more local shifts of reference: God is prepared to pardon lesser offences, then he is only God insofar as he represents perfect justice; deity is approachable only by analogy, then it represents an entirely new stage distinct from humanity; deity inheres in certain foods, or perhaps it is simply a matter of primogeniture. In each of these speeches, Satan provides several discrete, incompatible definitions of the given word, yet no definition is given priority over any other. This is not, in other words, the sort of Miltonic lexis that provokes the "active process of recognizing and resolving complexity, of distinguishing and determining between alternatives." Nor does it seem ultimately true that "words are being fought for in the Temptation, some reaching out for their fallen meanings, while the finer senses of others are not voiced." Rather Satan provides a conglomeration of alternatives that go unreconciled. Satan does not so much assign new meaning to words as assign so many meanings to the same words, in such quick succession, as to suggest that the words may not have any determinate meaning at all. I would modify Leonard's characterization ("a contest between Satan and Eve for mastery and interpretation of the natural language"); it is not mastery of the natural language that is at stake, but the very possibility that language may be "natural" at all.

The strategy is successful: in her final speech prior to taking the fruit, Eve both uses words in the way Satan has taught, and acts on the semantic uncertainty introduced by this usus loquendi. This speech, miming the verbal wedge Satan has interposed between obedience and autonomous choice, is full of antanachasis: Eve applies the figure to a series of words—associated with the Temptation ("praise," "beast," and the original Interdiction ("forbid," "good," "unknown," "had," "fear") respectively. Though she seems unable or unwilling to abuse the word "God" in this way, she does take up the other central word that Satan has worried, that is, "death":

---

In the wake of Satan's play on the word, Eve proposes a series of answers to the question: what does the word "death" mean? Is it an inevitability that contradicts her impression of freedom? Is it the immediate effect of eating the fruit? But then in what sense can it be applied to the serpent? Is it a punishment reserved for humankind? Eve does not arrive here at a new sense of the word, nor does Satan try to teach her a new sense; rather she follows Satan's verbal technique and so arrives at the point Satan wants: namely, "this ignorance of good and evil, Of God or death, of law or penalty" (774–75). Like the victim of a shell game, Eve chooses without recognizing what is in front of her: none of these words retain determinate meaning for her. Satan has taught Eve that the meaning of words derives from verbal context, from other words. Meaning, as a modern poststructuralist might say, is revealed to be "relational" rather than "referential," and language autonomous. Verbal autonomy is immediately translated into psychological or spiritual autonomy, as Eve takes and eats. The figure antanachasis provides Satan with an effective tool for demonstrating that words—the words associated with obedience to God and words in general—bear no necessary relation to any particular referents, that language is inherently unstable. Allusions to the Roman Mass in and around the Temptation sequence suggest a parallel between this conception of language and Milton's discussion, in De Doctrina, of the sheer indeterminacy of the eucharistic sign independent of its recipient. The structural analogy between eucharistic doctrine and literary semantics reinforces the impression, of increasing interest to recent scholars of the Renaissance and Reformation, that the period's intense doctrinal polemics concerning the status of the Eucharist provide an important source of comparative insight into the period's abiding preoccupation with defining the nature of language. The analogy between sacrament and language also casts light on perennial...
critical cruxes in the poem. The possibility of natural language or linguistic truth is normally considered in connection with judgment of Eve: as blame for the Fall is withdrawn from Eve, so it is assigned to ambiguous language, and thence to Milton for imposing the Fall's consequences undeservedly. The dichotomy is misleading. If the inversion of the human in Paradise Lost belongs to the locus of tragedy, the vehicle of that tragedy is language, from which neither poet nor protagonists could escape.

Notes

I am grateful to Judith H. Anderson, Herbert Marks, and the editors of this volume for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.


4. Regina Schwartz has written compellingly on the relevance of eucharistic theory for the study of early modern culture generally. "During the Reformation, discussions about how to understand and ritualize the performance of the body of God or the ingestion of a wafer that brought into the presence of the body of God, materially, spiritually, or symbolically, reflected assumptions about the entire world. What was at stake in these debates was not only the obvious issue of redemption, but also the relation of matter to spirit, the universal to the particular, the self to the other, language to its referents... That is, along with religion, one's ontology, epistemology, poetics and politics were bound up with his understanding of the Holy Communion" ("Real Hunger: Milton's Version of the Eucharist," Religion and Literature 31 [1999]: 1).


11. Schwartz, "Real Hunger," 11. Schwartz goes on to argue that the image of cosmic consubstantiality belongs to the prelapsarian world, that for Milton and reformers like him, "excommunicationate it as were," "the vision holds out the ideal of union with all matter and spirit, each other, God, the universe; but it is a reap offered to Tantalus" (15).


14. "The Papists hold that it is Christ's actual flesh which is eaten by all in the Mass. But if this were so, even the most wicked of the communicants, not to mention the mice and worms which often eat the eucharist, would attain eternal life by virtue of that heavenly bread" (CPW, 6:553).

15. I do not mean that the significance of the temptation can be reduced to historical allegory. If anything, for Milton, the reference would likely run in the other direction.

16. Satan's words themselves are imbued with a sense of intrinsic, physical presence; they are twice described as making their way "into the heart of Eve" (9.550, 734), using a figure of physical penetration to describe psychological affect; his words are inscribed as physical conveyors of their content ("replete with guile" [734], "impregnated / With reason" [737–38]) and leave in their wake a physical residue ("in her ears the sound / Yet raging" [736–37])—recalling Satan's resounding voice in Hell (1.314–15).

17. "Euiteme verbi contraea signification" is Quintilian's paraphrase of the Greek αντανάκλασις; "a single word with varied meaning" (Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 140 [9.3.68]—translation modified). George Puttenham, with his penchant

18. Compare Stanley Fish’s discussion of the “moral and linguistic anarchy,” “the awful freedom of complete relativity,” of the fallen angels in Hell (Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost [London: Macmillan, 1967], 95, 104). However, in demonstrating that Satan and his followers are made to guide the reader through the sequence: mistake—correction—instruction” (104), Fish seems to condemn them first for “fail[ing] to realize that physical posture has nothing to do with virtue” and then for “fail[ing] to see that physical configurations are to be interpreted morally” (98–100)—that is, first for treating signs as arbitrary and then for treating them as determinate. Evidently, the fallen angels’ relation to signs is not ultimately the object of Fish’s criticism.

19. Joseph Summers has set a firm line against what he calls “short cuts” in the interpretation of Paradise Lost. “No human quality or achievement is presented apart from its relationship to a state of mind and heart, to action, and to a total context of good and evil, it is only through such relationships, Milton believed, that events and qualities achieve moral status and human significance” (The Muse’s Method: An Introduction to “Paradise Lost” [1962; reprint, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1981], 28). But compare William Empson’s remarks on the patently unfair punishment of the serpent following the Fall (Milton’s God, rev. ed. [Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 197).

20. “Wonder not” are the first words of the Temptation, Satan’s effort to bring Eve, as he says, to “participate his godlike food” (9.717). Compare Raphael’s instruction that Adam “Wonder not” in an exactly, thoroughly, insymmetrical situation: namely, when the angel participates manlike food, eats with Adam and Eve, Raphael concludes, then “time may come when man / With angels may partake” (5.491–94). Empson notes a related parallel, pointing out that words Eve hears in her satanic dream (“Thiself ... sometimes in the air, as wee, sometimes / Ascend to Heavn’n”) are repeated in Raphael’s speech (“Your bodies ... winged ascend / Etereal, as wee”; 5.78–80, 497–99, Empson’s repetition italicized and his citation of old spelling followed here): “the voice of the mysterious dream and the spokesman to God are not merely saying the same thing (that God expects them to manage to get to Heaven, and that what they eat has something to do with it) but even using the same tricks of speech.” Empson concludes that God—responsible for this parallel (“all such accidents lie within his Providence”)—“has thus made it baffling for her to gauge his intentions” (150). In a way that is characteristic of his approach, Empson scrutinizes the poem’s unlit corners by bringing the poem’s assumptions (in the above case: God’s omnipotence, Eve’s incomplete knowledge of what is going on around her) to bear on passages where the poem’s concerns are elsewhere. If this procedure is “brilliantly perverse” (Fish, Surprised by Sin, 46), it is also cogent enough to assert that a “perversely” reading will be any that does not “always expect to find that Milton’s intention is perfectly matched by his performance” (A. J. A. Wallock, Paradise Lost and Its Critics, 3rd ed. [Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1964], 25). Though these episodes in the Miltonic Controversy are grounded in evaluative criteria of moral and/or aesthetic coherence that probably seem dated today, they do raise with remarkable clarity—and a refreshing lack of discursive theorization—the effort to “read against the grain” that, if it has lost its need to define its procedures explicitly, is nonetheless an aspect (retooled as “reading across the grain”) of the contemporary critical apparatus.


22. Leonard, Naming in Paradise, 199.

23. Compare Fowler’s annotation: “Eve, unwary, almost flirts—Silly compliments like that don’t say much for the tree’s effect on you” (Paradise Lost, 505 n. ix 616).


25. Compare Leonard’s comment, that Eve “scores many local victories before yielding Satan the linguistic mastery” (Naming in Paradise, 199). See Christopher Ricks on the “fruitless” “fruit” pun, as well as on the implications of “to excess” (Milton’s Grand Style [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961], 73–74).


28. Compare Kristin A. Pruitt’s similar comment on these lines, considering however their cumulative impact in light of Eve’s ignorance of death prior to her conversation with the serpent (Gender and the Power of Relationship: United as One Individual Soul in Paradise Lost [Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2003], 142).


30. Compare Leonard on 9.700–701: “the serpent darts into the gap between ‘God’ and ‘just’ and exploits this gap to deny that God is God. Satan speaks of ‘God’ so as to cancel the word. He never speaks it again” (Naming in Paradise, 201). As Leonard acknowledges, however, Satan does subsequently use the word “gods” (202). If the words “God” and “gods” necessarily have different referents (if, as Leonard says, “God is God”), then it is true that Satan does not use the word again after line 701; if, alternatively, the word “God” (in the singular or plural) has no determinate referent—the condition, I would argue, that Satan is trying to bring about—then the word “God” does reappear after line 701, only it is unaccompanied by its accustomed expletive.

31. Corns, Milton’s Language, 111.

32. Leonard, Naming in Paradise, 212.

33. Compare Herbert Marks’s discussion of the poem’s ambivalence with regard to the very possibility of “nominal truth” (“The Blotted Book,” in Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson [New York: Methuen, 1988], 211–33). John Leonard responds in effect that, unless “there are such things as ‘true names’ in Paradise Lost” (291), his book-length discussion of Milton’s poetic “striv[ing] . . . for the fallen in the face of ‘the darker notes of the fallen world’” (292)—“follows from a false premise” (2). This seems drastic. Even if the poem’s claims on the possibility of linguistic truth are ultimately ambivalent, that fact would not obviate the distinction between language that “strives” for such possibilities and language that deliberately opposes them, a distinction whose validity both Leonard and Marks endorse.
34. Compare J. B. Broadbent’s comment, in passing, that Satan “circles round a few key-words” and that Eve “drifts round the circle of traductio after him” (Some Graver Subject: An Essay on “Paradise Lost” [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960], 257).

35. Leonard suggests, “Where Satan had been a master of rhetoric, Eve has become its slave” ( Naming in Paradise, 209).

36. Satan’s focused and successful inducement of this relation to words answers the charge of J. M. Evans (and others) that Milton was working very much on an ad hoc basis in this part of the poem, that he was more concerned with making Eve’s conduct seem plausible than with exemplifying any particular doctrinal interpretation of her actions” (Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968], 280). This aspect of my argument could be framed as an attempt to provide what Waldock despaired of finding: “a satisfactory formula for the fall of Eve” (25).


38. The genesis of this link between verbal and spiritual autonomy is set out in Satan’s initial monologue in book 1. Satan’s tendency in this speech is to destabilize the meaning of words by means of anaphora. This affectation provides internal profile to the dramatic situation Satan finds himself in: namely, the nature of his and his fellows’ identities now that their autonomy from God has seemingly become fact. His lack of certainty as to Beelzebub (is this he whom that he?) leads to a remembrance of Beelzebub’s “brightness” that outshone others “bright” (86–87), evoking an oddly circular comparison. There follows a series of verbal repetitions:

he whom mutual league,
United thoughts and counsels, equal hope
And hazard in the glorious enterprise,
Joined with me once, now misery hath joined
In equal ruin.

Yet not for those,
Nor what the potent victor in his rage
Can else inflict, do I repent or change,
Though changed in outward lustre.

His utmost power with adverse power opposed.

What though the field be lost?

All is not lost. 
(87–91, 94–97, 103, 105–6; emphasis mine)