

INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

The Shadow in *Paradise Lost*

By Megan Clement

Abstract

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the shadow symbol shows how the idea of God functions in a secular context. This symbol creates a parallel between worship and the creative act; both actions constitute efforts toward union through indirect communication. The persistence of this symbol--from works as old as Dante's *Divine Comedy* to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* of 1996--inspires further examination of how this parallel affects the way we view art.

I. Introduction: Modern Expressions of Milton

An individual perspective is both a gift and a trap. A point of view is a privilege in that it is exclusive; no one can ever fully see through another's frame of reference. On the other hand, a mind, like a room with no doors, hinders travel in or out. At times mutual understanding seems impossible. When the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* relates the story of the beginning of his life to his creator, he laments, "Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence."¹ Through his sorrow and his reference to the archetypal man, he expresses the fundamental human desire to relate to others. He likens this trap of solitude to a personal Hell. For the creature, as with Milton's Satan, "evil thenceforth became [...] good" when Hell became home—when he lost hope of ever sympathizing with or relating to anyone.² John Milton's *Paradise Lost* restyles the traditional Christian story of the fall of Lucifer from angel to demon and the banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise. This retelling defies adherence to a dogmatic worldview, asserting the importance of the individual mind in all experience, religious or otherwise.

In Phillip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*, divine particles referred to as Dust or Shadows surround "matter [that] begins to understand itself."³ They surround humans and other intellectual creatures; angels are composed of this same substance.⁴ These shadow particles link mortals with divine beings, and suggest that self-awareness has something to do with this similarity.

In Milton's work, the shadow functions as a symbol of indirect communication that blurs typically assigned borders and links individuals to each other. Through this linkage, it also offers union with God. Milton asserts with this symbol that communication with others is the key to communication with God. In this paper, I aim to describe how the shadow functions in Milton's work in order to reveal the parallel between engaging with a work of art and worshipping one's own concept of God.

II. The Shadow as a Link

Raphael, an archangel and a messenger of God, visits Adam in Paradise to tell him about the battle in Heaven. When he begins to describe these events, which took place on a supposedly different spiritual plane, he laments the difficulty of translating "spiritual to corporal forms." He then hopefully muses, "what if Earth / Be but the shadow of Heav'n;"⁵ in other words, what if Heaven and Earth are linked as a body to its shadow. Consider the relationship between the body and its shadow: the body cannot feel its shadow, even though they often appear to be touching. Although the shadow is a physical form, it does not physically connect to the body. As the body moves around in light, the shadow manifests light's absence. The shadow is visible—undeniably present—yet it displays an absence. This display constitutes a paradox in that it likens the shadow, a physical phenomenon, with an apparition. Through this paradox

1 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818 Text* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105.

2 *Ibid.*, 188.

3 Phillip Pullman, *His Dark Materials Trilogy* (New York City: Yearling, 2003), 3.31.

4 *Ibid.*, 2.248

5 John Milton, *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*, Ed. Gordon Teskey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005), 5.573-5.

the shadow functions literally and symbolically as a link between the corporal and spiritual worlds.

Though both Raphael and Adam seem unaware of it, men and loyal angels share a similar connection. Adam assumes that Raphael, as an inhabitant of Heaven, is inherently more divine in nature. He humbly accepts his inferiority, greeting Raphael “with submiss approach and reverence meek.” Under the belief that Raphael is of a “a superior nature,” Adam “bow[s] low” when Raphael enters Paradise.⁶ A few lines before, the narrator’s description of both Adam and Raphael complicates this hierarchy. Adam,

our primitive great sire to meet
His godlike guest walks forth without more train
Accompanied than with his own complete
Perfections.⁷

As Adam “walks to meet / His godlike guest,” he walks “accompanied” with “his own complete perfections.” While Raphael is “godlike,” Adam is “complete” in his “perfections;” though “primitive,” he is “great.” Whether “perfect” or “godlike,” Adam and Raphael seem to stand on relatively equal footing. The division of the lines further blurs the distinction between them. When line 351 is read in isolation the subject of the verb “walks” appears to be “his godlike guest,” which would then grant Raphael the “train” of “perfections.” Though it is technically incorrect to read the line this way, a skeptic cannot deny that the line break easily allows for this misread. The “reader is invited to make a certain kind of sense only to discover (at the beginning of the next line) that the sense he has made is either incomplete or simply wrong.”⁸ The misread mimics the misunderstanding that angels exist on a higher (rather than simply different) plane than men. The ambiguity of the subject/predicate pairing allows the reader to choose, suggesting that the difference between men and angels lies in one’s perspective rather than a fixed hierarchy.

As Raphael continues his narration, he wonders if the “things therein” (the beings that populate Heaven and Earth) are “each to other like more than on Earth is thought.”⁹ As men are the principal inhabitants of Earth, and angels are that of Heaven, Raphael supposes that men may “be but the shadow” of angels. A shadow thus constitutes a type of link, though one that is difficult to discern. The frailty of the division between the “spiritual” and “corporal” worlds becomes apparent as the reader learns how much men and angels share in common and how little each party realizes it. It seems that the division lies within, as Raphael and Adam make assumptions about their respective positions in the divine hierarchy that have little external support.

III. Self-Awareness and “Perceptual Metaphors”

Despite his similarity to Raphael, Adam’s relation to the fallen angels remains. While Adam shares “perfection” with Raphael, he shares a sense of isolation from God with the fallen. God concretely establishes the relationship between the fallen angels and man the first time He speaks:

6 Ibid., 5.359-60.

7 Ibid., 5.350-53.

8 Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the Varorium” (The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Leitch, Vincent B. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 2071.

9 Milton, Paradise Lost, 5.575-6.

They trespass, authors to themselves in all
 Both what they judge and what they choose, for so
 I formed them free and free they must remain
 Till they enthrall themselves. I else must change
 Their nature and revoke the high decree,
 Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained
 Their freedom: they themselves ordained their Fall.
 The first sort by their own suggestion fell
 Self-tempted, self-depraved. Man falls deceived
 By th'other first: Man therefore shall find grace,
 The other none.¹⁰

At first “they” refers in general to the fallen; at the end of the passage “they” specifically refers to “the first sort” (the fallen angels) and “Man,” confirming that they form a group, fallen together. By grouping them together, God hints at a relation in “their nature;” He “formed them” under the same preconditions. The repeated use of variations of the pronoun “they”—God says “they,” “their,” or “themselves” 14 times in 11 lines—raises a barrier between God and the fallen. God alienates the fallen from Himself as He repeatedly names them as separate. He categorizes them as “other,” emphasizing their separation with repetition. Furthermore, He often repeats “they” and “themselves” on the same lines. This repetition underscores “their” responsibility over “themselves,” characterizing “their” will as independent or isolated from God’s.

Although it seems that God alienates the fallen men and angels by naming them as separate, He does not speak to them directly; therefore the source of this sense of isolation requires clarification. Adam characterizes his sense of self as fundamentally alienating. He recounts his first acquaintance with himself upon birth directly into manhood: “Myself I then perused and limb by limb / Surveyed.”¹¹ Because “myself” and “I” usually refer to the same subject, the terms stand juxtaposed rather than paired—the two terms denote separate subjects. Adam’s mind “survey[s]” his body, which he owns and controls. Some other mind (“I”) “peruse[s]” his mind—the seat of his sense of “myself”—as if it were a book that this other mind could read. This description calls attention to a subtle split in Adam’s consciousness. He is one part “myself,” a book that has been written by an unknown author (presumably God), and another “I” who reads it. Although the initial act of creation belongs to the author, “reading is directed creation;” words rest dormant on a page until a reader invests them with his own meaning.¹² Similarly, the act of perception (of one’s self or one’s surroundings) in itself constitutes the creation of a unique “perceptual metaphor,” an image of the world as only one sees it.¹³

Shortly after Adam’s creation, he falls asleep and dreams of flying around Paradise guided by “One [...] of shape divine.”¹⁴ Then he “waked and found / Before mine eyes all real as the

10 Ibid., 3.122-132

11 Ibid., 8.267-8.

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, “What Is Literature?” (The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Leitch, Vincent B. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 1339.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (Interactive Media Research Laboratory: Utah State University, <<http://imrl.usu.edu/6890/OnTruthandLies.pdf>>), 4.

14 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.295.

dream / Had lively shadowed.”¹⁵ God approaches him and reveals Himself to be the guide from his dream: “Whom thou sought’st I am [...] Author of all this thou seest.”¹⁶ Adam’s dream—nothing other than a product of his imagination—creates a “shadow” of reality. Since Adam’s dream mimics the real world, in this sense shadows represent “perceptual metaphors,” individual readings of the world as a text “Author[ed]” by God. Furthermore, God guides him through this dream; this suggests God’s presence within every perspective. One perspective thus constitutes a microcosm of totality, the sum of every point of view and its expression.

Adam senses and seeks out this creative force, asking the creatures that surround him and the “enlightened Earth” itself, “Tell if ye saw how came I thus, how here. / Not of myself: by some great Maker, then.”¹⁷ He recognizes that “I” does not owe its existence to “myself;” instead “some great Maker” granted life to both. Out of a desire for union with this force, he ecstatically demands from the landscape:

Tell me how may I know Him, how adore,
From whom I have that thus I move and live
And feel that I am happier than I know!
While thus I called and strayed I knew not whither
From where I first drew air and first beheld
This happy light, when answer none returned,
On a green shady bank profuse of flowers
Pensive I sat me down.¹⁸

The creative subject “I” floods the text immediately following Adam’s realization that God exists, emphasizing with repetition and proximity the link between these concepts (“I” and God). They share a marked similarity in that they both act as creative forces. God, “Thee Author of all being,” creates all of reality; in reading this text, man creates his own image of it.¹⁹ The compounding of creation (what God creates, man experiences and, in doing so, recreates) blends man with God through their action. This shared action reinforces an intimate connection between the individual and God already suggested in the Bible. In the Book of Exodus, when God speaks to Moses in the form of a burning bush and sends him to demand freedom from the Pharaoh, Moses asks God what he should tell the Pharaoh is His name; “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.”²⁰ God instructs Moses to mean God when he says “I AM.” In this way, Moses’ existence is intimately tied, even equated, with God’s.

Adam’s excitement subsides, along with the repetition of “I,” when “answer none returned.” Adam must search for connection to God within, through this internal creative force called “I.” This self-reflexive search for God is liberating but lonely. His effort seems futile; he sits alone as he searches for a force he believes to exist outside himself. Although Adam distinguishes between his two senses of self, he does not understand the nature or the consequences of this division. The

15 Ibid., 8.309-11.

16 Ibid., 8.316-7.

17 Ibid., 8.274, 277-8.

18 Ibid., 8.280-7.

19 Ibid., 3.374.

20 The King James Bible, Ed. JohnHurt.com, <<http://kingjamesbible.com>>, Exodus 3:14.

split between “myself” and “I”— the origin of self-consciousness—alienates man from God by creating the illusion that he is not the same as Him.

While Adam’s sense of self promises the possibility of union with God, Satan’s skewed conception of himself condemns him to isolation. After Abdiel asserts that the Son created the angels, the Devil retorts:

Remember’st thou
Thy making while the Maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now,
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised.²¹

Satan asserts that he “begot” his sense of self and has lived under its conditions. Though he doesn’t necessarily realize it, he characterizes his sense of self—rather than his actual existence—as self-created. God confirms this assertion in the passage quoted above from Book III: once “formed,” men and angels alike are “free,” in “both what they judge and what they choose.” They freely form their thoughts and actions and in this sense are “self-raised.” The repetition of the word “self” in Satan’s self-description calls attention to this concept. The fallen (both men and angels) act as “authors to themselves;” as “author[s]” of their thoughts, they “author” the self as a concept.²² Satan seems to think that because he creates his own perspective, he created the world; He considers himself the author of all creation rather than one reader of it. By doubting that God or anyone else created him, Satan reveals that he maintains an incredibly self-centered view of the universe. He essentially equates his own birth with the beginning of time since he “know[s] no time when” he did not exist. He conceives all of creation as existing only through his own point of view, rather than simply being colored by it. In this way, he isolates himself from access to every other being in the universe because he denies the existence of any other perspective.

God purposefully fashioned men to be “self-knowing, and from thence / Magnanimous to correspond with Heaven.”²³ In other words, self-knowledge precedes the ability to communicate with Heaven. This highlights an interesting dichotomy: self-knowledge (and self-alienation), while necessary for communication with the spiritual world, also constitutes the fallen condition. The sense of self first produces a sense of isolation, as we see in both Satan and Adam. However, it also provides the possibility for union with God as it provides the link to the creative force. Satan cannot see this as he proudly clings to his own false reasoning; “the pride connected with knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men.”²⁴ His belief in the supremacy of his own perspective prevents him from accessing any truth other than his own.

Every distinction made so far—between the “spiritual” and the “corporal,” between Adam and Raphael, between Adam and Satan, between “myself” and “I”—reveals itself as less absolute than supposed. The ambiguous divide that separates all things “spiritual” from those “corporal” (and perhaps by extension that which divides good from evil) shrinks as it becomes increasingly ill-defined. As the shadow constitutes a link rather than a division between the “spiritual” and “corporal” worlds, we must examine this symbol more closely to determine how it can link man to God, the creative force.

21 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5.857-60.

22 *Ibid.*, 3.122.

23 *Ibid.*, 7.510-1.

24 Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 1.

IV. The Dark Shadow

Raphael has difficulty answering all of Adam's questions; in addition to doubting Adam's ability to comprehend his answers, he fears revealing "secrets of another world perhaps / Not lawful to reveal."²⁵ The word "perhaps" betrays the fact that Raphael does not have full confidence in his information; he could be wrong about this restriction just as he is wrong about the difference between men and angels. When Adam asks why God created the universe, Raphael gently chides him to "abstain / To ask," explaining that "things not revealed which the invisible King / Only omniscient hath suppressed in night" are "to none communicable in Earth or Heaven."²⁶ If God "suppresse[s]" information as Raphael suggests, it is no wonder that many readers of *Paradise Lost* cannot love or respect God's authoritarian character. However, the reader must recall that Raphael's divine nature does not grant him infallibility. Raphael conceives of knowledge about the universe as being hidden "in night," negatively characterizing darkness as the mysterious seat of the forbidden. Raphael's general naiveté allows us to question the legitimacy of this conception.

However, one cannot deny that darkness has an ominous side; it has the potential to hide anything, including evil. Milton aligns the shadow (a body of darkness) with the two most evil beings in the universe, "Sin and her shadow Death."²⁷ When Satan nears the gates of Hell on his way out, he encounters Sin with her son, Death,

The other shape
 (If shape it might be called that shape had none
 Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
 Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
 For each seemed either:) black it stood as night.²⁸

The association of Death with the shapelessness and darkness of the shadow creates an unsolvable mystery. Its invisibility tempts one to try to figure out how to see it; through its inscrutability it hints that it contains secrets. Yet despite close examination it remains shapeless, senseless. In stark contrast, when God sends the Son to create the Earth, He "send[s] along" His "overshadowing Spirit" with him.²⁹ If God's Spirit casts its shadow over everything, His shadow covers and perhaps even composes the entire perceptible world. Here the ultimate ambiguity of the shadow symbol is revealed. It can characterize God's influence or presence, as well as that of Sin and Death. Through these images the shadow links good with evil, as it shows them to be at least in part composed of the same symbol. The shadow exists in an in-between realm that defies clear definition and thus also defies hierarchy.

25 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5.569-70.

26 Ibid., 7.120-4.

27 Ibid., 9.12.

28 Ibid., 2.666-70.

29 Ibid., 7.165-6.

V. Union

While the shadow that composes Death harbors frightful secrets, the shadow of God reveals solutions to mysteries. God sends his “overshadowing Spirit” to the Earth; His Spirit shades all of Earth. Though such widespread darkness would normally connote oppression, the shadow cast by God’s Spirit functions inversely. God, the “Fountain of light, [Him]self invisible,” embodies the meeting place of light and dark, as the light he emits is so bright that it cannot be seen, and so appears to be dark.³⁰ Milton explains the logic behind this trait often attributed to God: “when Thou shad’st / The full blaze of Thy beams [...] Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear.”³¹ In other words, when God offers His shade, the hems of His robes are just barely visible as His radiance no longer overwhelms the viewer. As an infinite Being, it would be impossible to see Him all at once; He “sitt’st / Throned inaccessible,”³² only partially visible at any point. Shadows offer small glimpses of God by shading the inscrutable intensity of divine light.

Recall that shadows also represent individual perspectives; this parallel suggests that “perceptual metaphors” somehow offer communion with God. Milton describes the manner in which this union is possible through creative work in his prayer to light. He distinguishes between literal darkness and the darkness that aids transcendent vision. First, he laments that “ever-during dark / Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men / Cut off.”³³ His blindness oppresses him, as this literal, perpetual darkness condemns him to a life of isolation. Yet his literal blindness grants him a greater sensitivity to another kind of light:

So much the rather thou, celestial Light,
Shine inward and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate. *There* plant eyes. All mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight!³⁴

The capital *L* in “Light” suggests that Milton refers to the light that radiates from God. Through “inward” focus, this divine light illuminates “things invisible to mortal sight;” in other words, fragments of Milton’s thoughts—which usually remain “mist[y]” both to others and even to Milton himself—become clear to him if he focuses “all [the] powers” of his mind. What he “see[s]” he then “tell[s];” he translates his “perceptual metaphors” into creative works (more specifically, poems) that he shares.

By suggesting that divine light is necessary to make the contents of his mind accessible, Milton does not merely invoke a divine muse as inspiration. Rather, he invokes the crucial link that exists between divinity and the individual mind. One cannot access the contents of another mind directly, just as one does not have direct contact with God. Works of art serve as points of contact between minds (although the contact goes only one way, from author to reader). They constitute immaterial remnants of another reality that is inaccessible all at once; they allow

30 Ibid., 3.374-5.

31 Ibid., 3.377-8, 380.

32 Ibid., 3.376-7.

33 Ibid., 3.45-7.

34 Ibid., 3.51-5.

partial, indirect access to another mind, just as shadows illuminate fragments of the infinite God by shading his Light. In the sense that “each painting, each book, is a recovery of the totality of being,” creative works function as shadows.³⁵ Through a direct parallel, the shadow symbol equates the access to another’s perspective (which is granted through creative work) with access to God.

Satan’s vanity prevents him from understanding the divine possibility inherent in creative work. Since God represents the culmination of all creative forces—that is, of every mind—this misunderstanding prevents him from knowing God. The Devil begins his temptation of Eve by coaxing her out of bed with alluring descriptions of the night that echo Milton’s prayer; the ways in which their descriptions contrast reveal Satan’s misunderstanding of shadows. Milton describes a “night-warbling bird,” inspired by beauty, “tun[ing] sweetest his love-labored song” under the “pleasing light [of the moon that] / Shadowy sets off the face of things.”³⁶ He praises the night as a time of inspiration and creation; only darkness can illuminate divine light. Furthermore, through the description of the bird Milton explains again, with different terms, the symbolic equality of works of art and shadows. At night, the “wakeful bird / Sings darkling and in shadiest covert hid / Tunes her nocturnal note.”³⁷ The bird that sings in the night is analogous to Milton, the poet who writes blinded in darkness. The bird’s hiddenness represents the inaccessibility of each individual within his own viewpoint; Milton’s blind isolation represents the inability to see through the eyes of another. As the bird is “wakeful,” it stays awake while others sleep and so sees what day-dwellers don’t. In other words, it lives in the darkness waiting for shadows to illuminate other perspectives, ways of seeing. “Darkling” refers to growing darkness; the creation of the bird’s song (or the poet’s poem) augments darkness by creating a shadow.

The parallel is blatant, as both Satan and Milton describe a bird singing amongst shadows; the differences lie in the details. Milton’s bird hides while she sings, working with precision as she “tunes” every note. Satan, on the other hand, conceives of a bird that “warbl[es],” or flippantly changes notes, as it sings a “love-labored song.” Milton represents creative work as solemn; the bird does serious work in dark isolation. By contrast, Satan’s bird sings as if in an effort to attract a mate or mere attention. Satan conceives of creative work merely as a means to glorify himself. Like Milton, he also praises the ability of the shadow to illuminate its surroundings in unexpected ways. However, the Devil wins Eve over with the promise of “pleasing light” (rather than the poet’s “celestial Light”) that shines “in vain / If none regard.”³⁸

The opposing descriptions of the light reveal a key difference in the types of darkness Milton and Satan idealize. In the poet’s night, he works in solitude in the hope that his work will help to unify men with one another and with God. Contrastingly, Satan suggests that the “pleasing light” already shines, waiting to reveal anything that comes under it—no work is necessary. He appeals to Eve’s vanity when he says that “Heav’n wakes with all his eyes / Whom to behold but thee,”³⁹ suggesting that she wastes her beauty if she neglects to allow the moonlight to illuminate her. Rather than illuminating the unseen, Satan calls attention to physical beauty, that which is easily seen. Thus Milton’s night houses the labor of creation, while Satan’s night hides secret pleasures and vain pursuits.

35 Sartre, “What Is Literature?,” 1346.

36 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5.40-3.

37 *Ibid.*, 3.38-40.

38 *Ibid.*, 5.43-4.

39 *Ibid.*, 5.44-5.

VI. Vanity & Hierarchy

Satan's self-awareness and its attendant self-absorption cause his rebellion and his fall. He threatens Michael as they prepare to fight, warning him that "the strife which thou call'st evil but we style / The strife of glory" will quickly come to an end.⁴⁰ Satan admits that he fights to win "glory." Pride motivates him to fight for superiority and, more importantly, for others to honor him as such. Yet, before the rebellion, the loyal angels already regard him as "brighter... amidst the host / Of angels than that star the stars among."⁴¹ He already had high status in heaven; the fact that this does not satisfy him points out the subjectivity of status. Though he fights for the praise of others, how he regards himself "stir[s] / The Hell within him."⁴²

In the passage quoted above, Satan asserts the relativity of good and evil and the ability of the individual to "style" or form the distinction between them. Yet his conception of his own status, similarly conceived of in comparative terms (ruler/subject, stronger/weaker, etc.), causes his indignation without granting him any power. Although he emphasizes his perceptual agency by claiming it again in the next line—he threatens to "turn this Heav'n itself into the Hell / Thou fablest,"⁴³ implying that he has the power to alter and control how others perceive Heaven or Hell—Satan's failure or unwillingness to shape his own conceptions of good and evil plagues him:

I feel
Torment within me as from the hateful siege
Of contraries: all good to me becomes
Bane, and in Heav'n much worse would be my state.⁴⁴

He emphasizes his subjective experience by referring to his own perspective with a personal pronoun ("I," "me," and "my") in each line. Yet despite asserting an autonomous, subversive point of view, conceptual opposites "torment" him "within" because "he now [unwittingly] places his behavior under the control of abstractions."⁴⁵ Satan rebels by inverting the usual hierarchy—that which he regards as intrinsically "good," or that which he assumes others perceive as "good," he considers "bane"—yet he still relies on its preset definitions. The inversion does not change the fact that neither "good" nor "bane" refers to "the unique and entirely individual original experience to which [each word] owes its origin."⁴⁶ The categorization of unique experiences and perceptions into concepts and opposites oversimplifies and discounts the creative nature of individual experience. This categorization makes hierarchy possible:

Everything which distinguishes man from the animals depends upon this ability to volatilize perceptual metaphors in a schema, and thus to dissolve an image into a concept. For something is possible in the realm of these schemata which could never be achieved with the vivid first impressions: the construction of a pyramidal order according to castes

40 Ibid., 6.289-90.

41 Ibid., 7.132-3.

42 Ibid., 4.19-20.

43 Ibid., 6.291-2.

44 Ibid., 9.120-3.

45 Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," 4.

46 Ibid., 3.

and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries.⁴⁷

By relying on words (“concept[s]”) to define his “impressions,” Satan confines himself to understand, categorize, and rank his experience with predefined terms. His belief in the supremacy of his perspective leaves him ignorant of the creative aspect of it. The “hateful siege / Of contraries” rages within him because he insists on defining his experience along a bipolar spectrum which he believes is absolute. Despite the freedom that “the high decree...ordained,” Satan renders himself inferior on this spectrum and thus “ordain[s] [his] Fall” as he envisions and maintains this hierarchy within his own point of view.

Both the name and the placement of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil reveal that God, in “warn[ing]” Adam and Eve to “shun to taste” its fruit,⁴⁸ instructs them to be wary of hierarchy rather than of the knowledge of either good or evil in itself. Adam and Eve learn of the battle in Heaven and of Death while feasting in Paradise with Raphael. Since this conversation does not cause their fall, knowledge of good and evil things in themselves does not remove them from grace. God does not place a Tree of Death “amid the garden by the Tree of Life;”⁴⁹ instead, opposite to this symbol of life grows the symbol of opposites. Rather than ranked opposite and above death in a binary relation, life stands opposed to all binaries. In this sense, conceptual opposites create false dichotomies and limit thought. They manufacture the sense of isolation that prevents union and causes spiritual death.

Satan continuously adds misunderstandings to his portfolio of perceptions as he conceives of everything in terms of hierarchy. He contemplates the purpose of the Tree of Life, which he figures God planted with,

Envious commands invented with design
To keep them low whom knowledge might exalt
Equal with gods. Aspiring to be such,
They taste and die: what likelier can ensue?⁵⁰

Satan hypocritically speaks with contempt of a God that he believes desires “glory” just as he does. He assumes that God shares his desire for superiority, questioning why God wouldn’t want to be “honored more” by the praise of more knowledgeable, godlike men.⁵¹ Though he uses this argument to justify tempting Eve—and so does not necessarily believe what he says—it still contains the underlying assumption that God enjoys superiority and desires praise. He fails to see that one who desires “equal[ity] with gods” must first accept his inferiority. He makes two more key assumptions about universal ranking: that God regards himself as superior to humans and that He designed this universe and all of the creatures in it through a fearful and jealous effort “to keep them low.” However, unlike Satan—whose vanity lies at the heart of his torment—God does not seem to regard himself at all. When Adam tells Eve about the stars, he explains (in direct contradiction to Satan) that,

47 Ibid., 4.

48 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.327.

49 Ibid., 8.327.

50 Ibid., 4.524-7.

51 Ibid., 5.73.

These [stars] though unbeheld in deep of night
 Shine not in vain. Nor think, though men were none,
 That Heav'n would want spectators, God want praise!⁵²

Adam asserts that both God and the stars lack vanity in the sense that they do not require attention or praise from man. The stars “shine not in vain;” they shine with a purpose that has nothing to do with vanity or pride. Though the reader does not have any particular reason to trust Adam’s authority on this point, the stars clearly lack vanity because they lack self-awareness, the source of vanity. Because Adam describes God and the stars together, perhaps he conceives of them as having similar traits; perhaps God lacks self-awareness as well.

VII. The Selfless God

As an infinite being, God rests at the center of every binary, the paradoxical resolution to every opposite; as the being that represents totality, He contains every concept and its opposite. God’s intense, simultaneous power and passivity manifests throughout the poem, demanding closer examination of how His will affects man. God indirectly asserts that He has no will of his own when He explains that man will fall without “aught by me immutably foreseen.”⁵³ The passive construction of God’s description of His action—in which “foreseen” acts as an adjective rather than a verb—creates the sense that foresight is thrust upon Him as opposed to actively sought. This sense of passivity becomes more acute as God repeatedly narrates away his agency in the same passage. When He explains that “the high decree [...] ordained / their freedom,”⁵⁴ the decree performs the action of the verb instead of God. In this way, God humbly emphasizes His powerlessness to affect the fate of both men and angels. Although He asserts his agency when he states that He “formed them free,”⁵⁵ He quickly relinquishes His authority in the next line when “they enthrall themselves.” He seems to assert an intense amount of authority when He declares, “what I will is fate.”⁵⁶ However, He also holds man responsible for his most vital actions; without “least [...] shadow of fate [...] they themselves ordained their fall.”⁵⁷ God describes fate as a shadow; this suggests that like other shadows it is a creative work, a narrative to explain the past rather than a decree to mandate the future. In this sense, fate becomes a self-created matter of perspective. Although this passivity serves God’s purpose—to prove that man holds responsibility for his own fall—it seems inherently contradictory for the all-powerful One to seem so powerless. This leads the reader to question the function of God’s simultaneous activity and passivity.

God’s indirect relinquishing of His own authority suggests that He lacks individuality. In other words, perhaps God seems to lack agency because He’s not an individual agent. God explains to the Son the nature of His totality:

Boundless the deep because I am who fill
 Infinitude, nor vacuous the space

52 Ibid., 4.674-6.

53 Ibid., 3.121.

54 Ibid., 3.126-8.

55 Ibid., 3.124-5

56 Ibid., 7.173

57 Ibid., 3.120, 128.

(Though I uncircumscribed Myself retire
 And put not forth My goodness which is free
 To act or not): necessity and chance
 Approach not Me, and what I will is fate.⁵⁸

He does not claim control over His own “goodness which is free / To act or not.” Although “necessity and chance” do not affect the will of God, the odd punctuation (a closed parenthesis and a colon) that separates this phrase from “to act or not” relates the two halves of the line in conflicting ways. The parenthesis separates the two phrases; the colon links the two as if by definition, as in prose where the phrase that follows the colon defines the phrase that precedes it. God suggests that action is controlled by two contradicting forces: the actor’s decision simply “to act or not” and by “necessity and chance.” He defines action in an extremely mundane sense; some events have an executor, others just happen, randomly and according to the laws of nature. God rests uninvolved in quotidian action in an authoritative sense.

To circumscribe is to surround, as with borders. To uncircumscribe is therefore to remove or erase borders. Because God is by definition an infinite Being, when He ceases to “fill / Infinitude,” He erases Himself; he “retire[s],” or relinquishes his agency. By nature God does not act because if He took any action, He would become an individual actor. Assigned the limited borders that come with individuality, He would disappear as an infinite Being. However, God’s omnipotence allows Him to be present and absent simultaneously, rendering such a disappearance incomplete or irrelevant. When the Son convenes with the Father, “He also [goes] / invisible, yet stay[s]—such privilege / Hath omnipresence.”⁵⁹ With this “privilege” He can exist as an infinite being and as an individual at the same time.

These coexisting contradictions that characterize God—present/absent, active/passive, individual/infinite—help to explain the idea that individuals channel the will of God. The line above continues, “and the work ordained, / Author and end of all things.”⁶⁰ In this line the action of creation is split in two: “The Father *ordains* (commands) the work that the Son has performed: Creation.”⁶¹ The Father, in distancing Himself from His own action, reveals Himself to be a passive force—but a force nonetheless. Rather than an oppressive Authority, this sort of indirect action characterizes God as a Source of action. He does not impose His will; He is Will. This split in creative action mirrors the manner in which God is responsible for individual perspectives while each individual is responsible for his own.

VIII. The Individual Fall

Common arguments over the precise moment that the Fall occurs in *Paradise Lost*—when God creates the Universe, when Satan rebels (or plans to), when Eve eats the apple or when she has the nightmare—overlook a key characteristic of the Fall. It recurs; the Fall, as well as the fight against it, occurs and will occur within every individual. Milton laments the fact that he must

58 Ibid., 7.168-73.

59 Ibid., 7.588-90.

60 Ibid., 7.590-1.

61 Ibid., Note 7. 590-1.

relate the tale of Adam and Eve's fall, exclaiming that his duty to recount it is a "sad task!"⁶² Raphael describes his duty to tell Adam the story of the battle of Heaven with the same phrase. This parallel links the fall of Satan and the other rebel angels with the fall of Man; furthermore, the echo of the phrase characterizes the event itself as an echo, a repetition. The stories about the rebellion in Heaven and original sin in Paradise constitute archetypes describing the fight and the fall that occurs within each individual.

The falls of Satan and Eve emphasize the fall as a repetitive occurrence. During the battle in Heaven, Michael denounces Satan as the "Author of evil unknown till thy revolt, / Unnamed in Heav'n, now plenteous, as thou seest."⁶³ Satan's rebellion seems to mark the creation of evil. However, if God is "Author of all this thou seest," what Satan creates must be a shadow of evil, one individual manifestation of it. In other words, Satan's fall marks not the creation of evil itself but the influence of evil on one's perspective. Satan infects Eve's mind with dreams "of offense and trouble which [her] mind / Knew never till this irksome night" when he whispers in her ear while she sleeps.⁶⁴ Satan causes her to experience a new kind of inner conflict; she cannot yet name it, as she describes her dream and her feelings with a string of negative adjectives as if searching for the description that fits. In this sense, Eve's mind is like Heaven, where "evil unknown" had been "unnamed." Since the individual mind is so closely tied to God, Heaven and Paradise—two realms in which God is often represented as literally present and in which individuals fell from grace—function to describe aspects of the landscape of an individual mind.

Satan conceives of his own suffering in terms of conflict; he suffers "the hateful siege / of contraries" as he struggles to define good and evil for himself. The war between good and evil that occurs within every mind is the struggle to overcome opposites, concepts established by language that threaten to render thoughts generic. The struggle is the effort required to communicate, to access one's own "perceptual metaphors" in order to bring to light a unique perspective. The goal of this struggle is union: the shadows that constitute works of art, fragments of a point of view, make a previously hidden piece of totality accessible.

IX. Conclusion: Modern Expressions of Belief

In the same way that God only reveals Himself partially in the shadows, communication never reveals each to the other in total. A work of art creates a sense of union for the enthralled reader; he senses that another person shares his exact thoughts, his exact way of seeing. On the other hand, the author remains in isolation, unable to share this sense of union with any of his readers. This indirect form of communication echoes the split that recurs throughout *Paradise Lost*; a split similarly divides Satan and God, good and evil, isolation and union.

The focus on the individual mind as the platform through which union with God is possible makes creative work essential; through creative work, one can illuminate for others the piece of divine totality that he contains. When one interacts with and relates to the work of another, the reader gains access to something previously hidden—another viewpoint. This creates one link on an infinite chain; communication with others constitutes union with God in the sense that every mind contains a piece of Him. The practice of art becomes divine when conceived of in these terms. Although institutional Christianity no longer dominates

62 Ibid., 9.13.

63 Ibid., 6.262-3.

64 Ibid., 5.345.

the Western ethos, the fundamental desire to communicate with others constitutes a spiritual void that begs for fulfillment. Milton's work, through revealing how religious experience is creative and individual, opens the discussion concerning how individuals experience this void today by revealing what it is in nonspiritual terms—that is, a desire to communicate, to escape perceptual isolation. To discuss the effort to fill this spiritual void in modern terms is to discuss the relationship between the author and the reader.

Bibliography

Fish, Stanley. "Interpreting the *Varorium*." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leitch, Vincent B. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001. 2071. Print.

The King James Bible. Ed. JohnHurt.com. <http://kingjamesbible.com>

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Gordon Teskey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005. Print.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." *Interactive Media Research Laboratory: Utah State University*. <<http://imrl.usu.edu/6890/OnTruthandLies.pdf>>.

Pullman, Phillip. *His Dark Materials Trilogy*. New York City: Yearling, 2003. Print.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "What Is Literature?" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leitch, Vincent B. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001. 1336-49. Print.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: 1818 Text*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

