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“More Safe I Sing With Mortal Voice:”
The Bard, The Reader, and the Problematics of Creation in *Paradise Lost*

Benjamin Adam Moran

Milton has long been viewed as a poet who exudes the highest confidence in his art and authority in the presentation thereof. Joseph Addison, writing in 1712, did much to establish this widely held belief when he stated that readers find in *Paradise Lost* “all the Greatness of Plan, Regularity of Design, and masterly Beauties which we discover in *Homer* and *Virgil*.”¹ Until recently, Addison’s position has served as a baseline for the study of Milton’s poetry and *Paradise Lost* in particular. Addison’s view, however, ignores a plethora of ‘problems’ within the poem which appear to complicate and even contradict the goals of the poem’s speaker as presented in the first twenty-six lines.

In the last twenty years, a new direction of Milton criticism has emerged, one which seeks not to deemphasize these “issues” within the text but call attention to them as constitutive parts of the poem.² This movement in Milton studies, though, has hitherto left unexamined an important element of *Paradise Lost*: the Bard, that is, the speaker of the poem. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton the historical figure created an epic speaker to meet certain creative needs, one of which is to function as a pivoting perspective that allows for a seamless transition between different realms (Hell, Heaven, Eden). The Bard is not simply a rhetorical function:³ he develops as a character as he creates the text/song of the poem and this development is not unidirectional. In what follows, I intend to show that Milton created the figure of the Bard to illustrate the

¹ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* 297 (February 9, 1712), in *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York, 2005), 379.

² Notable examples of this ‘New Milton Criticism’ include John Rumrich’s *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge, 1996), Peter Herman’s *Destabilizing Milton: “Paradise Lost” and the Poetics of Incertitude* (New York, 2005) and *The New Milton Criticism*, eds. Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer (Cambridge, 2012).

³ Anne Davidson Ferry, *Milton’s Epic Voice* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), 3-18 and throughout.

complicated and uncertain process of artistic creation, especially overtly Christian creative work. Milton's Bard is not a speaker who holds the unwavering position of a confident and strong narrator, but one who builds up his own sense of poetic authority only to have that role subsequently deconstructed during and through the act of creating *Paradise Lost*. Many of the "problematic passages" of Book I, largely related to perceived sympathy for Satan, are spoken by the Bard and play important roles in his characterization.

A word or two first needs to be said regarding my differentiation of Milton and the character of the Bard, for scholars typically identify the speaker of the poem as the historical Milton.⁴ Critics in the past have equated Milton with the Bard of *Paradise Lost* because there is much overlap between the two. For example, Milton was completely blind by the time he began to compose *Paradise Lost*; in the poem, the Bard spends a significant portion of the invocation in Book III speaking to "holy Light" on how "thou / Revist'st not these eyes, that roll in vain / to find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn" (III.22-24)⁵. As Robert McMahon suggests, Milton used elements of his personal life to inform the imagery and poetry of *Paradise Lost*, but this does not mean the Bard and Milton are the same⁶. Rather, Milton's Bard, like Dante Alighieri's character Dante in *La Commedia*, is a persona influenced by the poet's life experiences, one which remains flexible enough to accomplish Milton's goals, one of which is to present the many facets of poetic creation and how the very act of creating a Christian poem changes its Christian creator.

⁴ See for example Peter. C Herman's "'Whose fault, whose but his own?': *Paradise Lost*, contributory negligence, and the problem of cause" in *The New Milton Criticism*, 49. Herman writes that "the initial speaker [is] usually identified with John Milton," and this forms one of the basic assumptions of his argument.

⁵ All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis, 2003).

⁶ Robert McMahon, *The Two Poets of Paradise Lost* (Baton Rouge, 1998), 38-42 and throughout.

Most notably, Milton elaborates on this process in the four epic invocations of the poem, where he presents the Bard as composing his oration in real time, responding immediately to the vision his muse Urania imparts to him. These invocations, coming at the beginnings of Books I, III, VII, and IX, were long thought by scholars of Milton to exist outside the main narrative of *Paradise Lost*. Dr. Johnson, for example, wrote in “Life of Milton” that these proems were “short digressions” and “superfluities” that “might doubtless be spared”⁷ if they did not possess aesthetic merit in themselves, and this position still has its adherents⁸. Dr. Johnson failed to recognize that the invocations respond to the events of the poem that are related immediately before the invocations. They do not function independently from the “main story,” as Roger Sundell has suggested, but as an integral part of the main story, wherein the Bard reveals his states of mind at different points in the poem. In this study I shall limit myself to an examination of the invocation to Book I and text immediately following it, where the Bard vacillates most dramatically. This change comes early in the poem but has substantial implications for the whole.

In the first invocation, Milton constructs his Bard as supremely confident in his poetic project which seeks to “justify the ways of God to men” (I. 26), and his confidence and ambition manifest themselves in several ways, the first of which is the diction that the Bard uses in singing this prologue to the poem. Milton’s diction is universally classified as “high diction,” and the language of the first invocation is no exception. Here, the Bard uses a concentration of words that connote expansion and scale, not atypical for the beginning of an epic. The words “flight,” “soar,” “Mount,” “outspread,” “vast Abyss,” and “highth” all help establish early the epic quality

⁷ Samuel Johnson, “Life of Milton” in *A Johnson Reader*, ed. E.L. McAdam and George Milne (New York, 1964), 416.

⁸ E.g. Roger Sundell, “The Prologues of *Paradise Lost*” in *Milton and the Art of Sacred Song*, states that Johnson was correct to view the prologues as “independent from the poem’s main story (67).”

of the poem. Although many of these words are used in connection with Urania, the Bard adopts this language primarily as a means of elaborating on the magnitude of the poem to follow, for the language associated with flight comes only after the Bard refers to his own project which “with no middle flight intends to soar / Above th’ *Aonian* Mount” (I.14-15). The accumulation of such univocal diction generates the appearance of inevitability: not only will he sing a successful poem, he will do so without the faintest mark of inferior artistry. Thus, the Bard’s diction after his reference to his “advent’rous song” functions as much to create a magnanimous tone as it does to display the characteristics of the epic muse.

The language of primacy reinforces the grandeur established in the diction of expansiveness. The Bard uses “first” in the first line in reference to the subject matter of the poem and then again in the nineteenth line to indicate the eternal presence of the muse. Between these lines, the Bard says that his poem will speak of “Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme” (I.17). By surrounding a reference to his own work with descriptions of primacy, the Bard attempts to present his poem as bearing the same qualities as his subject and muse, implying that his poem will be the beginning of a new type and quality of poetry. The combination of the diction of primacy and flight generates a sense of poise and stateliness and, implicitly, of the guidance of Providence. Not only will the Bard tell a successful narrative and account for all matters preliminary to the primary narrative (i.e., the Fall), he (self-consciously) will do so in a style befitting the subject matter and appropriate for one led by the divine.

The diction of the first invocation suggests most clearly the ambition and self-confidence of the Bard, but the formal element of lineation also contributes to this suggestion. While the poem presents itself under the guise of a spoken text (“*Sing* heavenly muse”), Milton consistently uses formal characteristics of written poetry to elaborate upon the effects of the

Bard's language, and the case of the first invocation provides the initial evidence of that characteristic of *Paradise Lost*. Clearly it is Milton who guides the lineation, but its effect contributes to our understanding of the Bard. In the Proem, lineation produces the most direct comparisons between the Bard and Urania his Muse. Speaking of Urania's presence at the beginning of time, the Bard says

And chiefly Thou O spirit,

Thou from the first
 Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
 Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
 And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support. (I.17; 19-23)

The words "Abyss" and "dark" share an association with each other outside of this passage, as "abyss" was the Greek word used in Genesis 2 to approximate the Hebrew word for "the deep,"⁹ the face of which was covered in darkness.¹⁰ In this passage, "Abyss" is connected with Urania while that which is "dark" is the Bard's. The lineation, which places these words in the final positions of each line, confirms and strengthens the association between the two. In doing so, Milton's lineation brings the Bard and his muse closer together, both spatially on the page and cognitively in the narrative.

The line breaks also emphasize the imperative mood used by the Bard, which he employs five times in the first invocation. Three of these verbs occur in the first position of the line ("Sing," "Instruct," and "Illumine"). While it is commonplace in epic invocations to employ the imperative mood when calling upon one's muse¹¹, the Bard repeats it more insistently than do his ancient predecessors, implying a command over the subject being ordered, that is, Urania. The

⁹ *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, 212n.

¹⁰ Genesis 1:2, Authorized Version.

¹¹ Compare Virgil's "Musa, mihi causas memora" (*Aeneid* 1.8) and Homer's "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles" (*The Iliad*, 1.1, trans. Robert Fagles).

Bard's repeated use of the imperative voice suggests that he is not only self-assured in his stated aims of "justifying the ways of God to men," but that he believes himself to surpass the power and talent of his muse. This proem is not a "poet's submission to the voice of his muse"¹², but a gesture towards the poet's own assumed superiority.

The invocation itself is a convention which the Bard, at least the first time, appropriates as an assertion of his confidence and ambition as a poet. Milton emphasizes these qualities not only by the placement of imperative verbs, but also through enjambment, particularly when the Bard directly speaks of his own "advent'rous Song." "Song" ends line 13, and the following two lines are both enjambed. The final words in each are "soar" and "pursues," verbs both referring to the action of the "Song" itself. As Archie Burnett elucidates, the placement of the verb at the end of an enjambed line often has great significance that extends beyond that of the line itself.¹³ The enjambment of these lines mirrors the action of verbs that come at the end of each: "soar" connotes a lack of restraint, and the enjambment mimics flight "Above the *Aonian* Mount." Similarly the placement of "pursues" at the end of an enjambed line relates to the action of the verb, and it creates a "momentary suspense"¹⁴ with the delay of the direct object of 'it' (whose antecedent is "Song") until the next line. The effect of the lineation here is twofold. First, this enjambment continues the effect, seen in the previous line of verse, of emphasizing the poem as a moving body, both soaring and pursuing. Secondly, the "momentary suspense" places additional stress on "Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme" (I.16), which is further accented by the full stop after "Rhyme." This line concludes a sequence in which Milton enhances the language of the Bard, that is, language of self-confidence, ambition and

¹² William G. Riggs, *The Christian Poet of Paradise Lost* (Berkeley, 1972), 20.

¹³ Archie Burnett, "'Sense Variouslly Drawn Out': The Line in *Paradise Lost*," *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 5.1 (2003), 81 and throughout.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

grandiosity— perhaps even arrogance—through the deployment of meaningful lineation and enjambment.

Perhaps even more significantly, the Bard reveals his initial state of mind through the use of allusion. *Paradise Lost* as a whole teems with biblical and classical allusion, exhibiting the wide range of Milton’s reading and knowledge. In the proem to *Paradise Lost*, the Bard’s appropriation of other texts grants considerable insights into his psychology, particularly in his references to Moses, Icarus, and “the *Aonian Mount*.” Although the proem is a mere twenty-six lines in length, there are several other instances of intertext within its space that will not be discussed here. These three allusions do, however, illustrate representatively the Bard’s allusive intentions.

The Bard never invokes Moses by name, but the allusion to him is clear enough. The Bard speaks of Moses in relation to the Muse,

that on the secret top
Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the beginning how the Heav’ns and Earth
Rose out of *Chaos*... (I.6-10)

What is the significance of Moses to the Bard? Clearly Milton is making an indirect comparison between the two, blurring the direct comparison through the medium of the Muse. John Shawcross states that one must consider the interpretive history of Moses and his associated stories in order to understand the qualities that the Bard is trying to draw from the allusion. Milton, he writes, viewed Moses as “typologically identified with the Son in his role as prophet.”¹⁵

¹⁵ John T. Shawcross, *With Mortal Voice: The Creation of Paradise Lost* (Louisville, 1981), 15.

For Milton, ‘prophet’ was always associated with the qualities of a leader, instead of simply a divinely inspired individual as the word denotes. Indeed, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton writes that the prophet’s role is “to educate his church in heavenly truth and to teach the whole will of his Father,”¹⁶ and he subsequently invokes a passage from Deuteronomy as a justification of this point. Milton clearly had Moses in mind as an ideal prophet; furthermore, the diction that describes Moses in *Paradise Lost* bears close affinity with the passage excerpted from *DDC* (“taught the chosen Seed” and “educate his church,” in particular). This likeness, alongside the typological history of Moses presented by Shawcross, suggests that the allusion intends to evoke the leadership and prophetic qualities associated with Moses. In speaking the lines above, the Bard designs himself as a leader to the reader/listener during the experience of the poem, in the same way that Moses led “the chosen Seed” out of Egypt. Moreover, this allusion calls on different aspects of the story of Moses when it separately refers to “*Oreb*” and then “*Sinai*.” Horeb is the mountain on which Moses first received the imperative of Yahweh via the burning bush in Exodus 3, and he received the Decalogue on Mount Sinai much later. Michael Lieb writes that “Horeb represents the announcement of delivery” and “Sinai represents the fulfillment of delivery.”¹⁷ The Bard, in singing this easy glide from “Of *Oreb*” to “of *Sinai*,” made easier by internal rhyme, hints at the fulfillment of his own Song, conveying that, for him, creative completion is but a half line of verse removed from its beginning. In short, he believes his song-poem needs only to be executed, and that will be done without much effort.

The allusion to Moses spans only five lines but its implications are far-reaching, as it establishes the pattern of allusive function in the four invocations of *Paradise Lost*. Clearly the

¹⁶ John Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana, Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 6., gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, (New Haven, 1973), 432 (citations to the *Complete Prose* are hereafter cited as *YP*, followed by volume number and page number). The Latin original reads as follows: “Propheticum est ecclesiam suam caelesti veritate erudire, plenamque patris voluntatem edocere.”

¹⁷ Michael Lieb, *The Dialectics of Creation: Patterns of Birth & Regeneration in Paradise Lost* (Amherst, 1970), 39.

allusion to Moses says something about the Bard's opinions of himself and his song at this early point in the poem. The allusion contained in the line "That with no middle flight intends to soar" (I. 14) also grants insight into the Bard's mind. Both Robert McMahon and Anthony Low identify the phrase "with no middle flight" as alluding to the Ovid's story of Daedalus and Icarus in the *Metamorphoses*.¹⁸ In that myth, Daedalus, a skilled artisan, makes for his son a pair of wings from wax and feathers. He subsequently advises Icarus to "shape his course in middle flight" so that he flies neither too close to the sea or the sun. Ignoring his father, Icarus flies too close to the sun and, after the wax melts, falls into the ocean. For many Renaissance poets throughout Europe, the story of Icarus was a fable of excessive pride and immaturity.¹⁹ Given the unrelenting focus in the first invocation on poetic ambition, however, it seems more prudent to view this allusion in terms of Icarus' ambition rather than his immaturity. Indeed, the allusion enters into *Paradise Lost* as a negation: the Bard's song will not heed Daedalus' advice to Icarus, in spite of the end Icarus met with. McMahon writes, "Confident of his powers... [the bard] dares disaster [of flying too high] as he proclaims his ambition; sure of his strength, he trusts that he will not fail."²⁰

Another allusion to classical myth follows immediately, coming in the phrase "Above th' Aonian Mount" (I. 15). In classical literature, 'Aonia' was an area of Greece that contained Mt. Helicon, home to the nine Muses; often poets used 'Aonia' as a synonym for Mt. Helicon. Milton likely was thinking of Virgil when constructing this line, specifically a passage from his *Eclogues*. Describing Gallus, one of the fictional pastoral poets depicted in what itself is pastoral poetry, Virgil writes:

¹⁸ *Two Poets*, 28; Anthony Low, "'No Middle Flight': *Paradise Lost*, I.14" *Milton Newsletter* III (1969), 2-4.

¹⁹ David Quint, "Fear of Falling: Icarus, Phaeton, and Lucretius in *Paradise Lost*." *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (Autumn 2004), 847.

²⁰ *Two Poets*, 31.

tum canit, errantem Permessi ad flumina Gallum,
Aonas in montis ut duxerit una sororum²¹

[then he sings how one of the sisters led Gallus, wandering near the rivers
of Permessus, to the Aonian mountains]

Virgil's passage describes one of the Muses (*una sororum*) physically leading a poet to the home of poetic inspiration, and Milton apparently found the imagery of the poet in close physical proximity to Mt. Helicon striking enough to adopt it in *Paradise Lost*. Unlike the allusion to Moses, the allusion to Mt. Helicon makes immediately evident what the Bard seeks to accomplish. Singing this line of verse, the Bard goes beyond Virgil's words, saying that his song will soar not to the mountains (*Aonas in montis*) but *above* the Aonian mountain, while lesser poets and one of the nine Muses remain below on the ground. As with the allusion to Icarus, this allusion to Aonia, and specifically to Virgil's imagery of the poet at the base of Mt. Helicon, signals yet another moment in the proem where the Bard seeks to present himself to the reader/listener as a poet endowed with an unequivocal talent, one who will create a poem at the apex of brilliance.

The reference to Aonia is but one of many ways in which the Bard accomplishes the construction of himself as a successful epic poet in these first twenty-six lines. The characteristics that help build this appearance of a poet of rhetorical skill and complete control of his subject matter extend to the very last lines of the proem. In those lines, the meter, which varies broadly throughout the proem and *Paradise Lost*, returns to a pristine iambic pentameter ("I máy assért etérnal Próvidénce, / And jústifý the wáys of Gód to mén" [I.25-26]). These perfectly iambic lines precipitate a sense of order²² that lives in synchrony with everything that

²¹ Virgil, *Eclogues*, 6.64-65.

²² Compare Paul Fussell's interpretation of Pope's "Essay on Man" in *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form: Revised Edition* (New York, 1979), 37. Fussell states that "the recovery of iambic regularity...constitutes an exquisite return to optimistic normalities after a short sojourn."

has come hitherto in the poem. While ostensibly an invocation to his muse, the Bard uses the invocation primarily as an assertion of the epic qualities of his own poetry and to build the appearance of the inevitability of success in his efforts to mediate God to humanity. McMahon succinctly writes that *Paradise Lost* may be a “Christian epic,” but the *epic* dominates this invocation.²³

Given the extent to which the Bard achieves his goals of composing his own visage of a successful epic poet, it is understandable that critics have adopted Addison’s suppositions of the poem as work held together by a skillful master. The first twenty-six lines of *Paradise Lost* leave a permanent mark on all readers, and the power and grandeur of them have driven three hundred years of readers see them as filled with a sense of certainty that has come to characterize the entirety of the poem itself. Addison saw *Paradise Lost* as being without even the slightest incertitude, which for him would of course be an aesthetic flaw. I suggest that the Bard of the first invocation is in line with Addison’s conception of the poem: without flaw, full of ambition, and beckoning towards the certitudes that come only with regimented structure and control of poetry and poetic subject matter. It is most significant, however, that everything the Bard says in the first invocation is spoken prior to any actual engagement with the subject material, at least in the visionary manner that he receives from Urania during the construction of the poem. Indeed, the very act of singing and creating the poem that is *Paradise Lost* affects the Bard. The proem to *Paradise Lost* marks a high point in the text for him; never again in the poem will he display the unrestrained high rhetoric alongside the unflinching certitude seen in these lines.

Paradise Lost, then, is partly about the ways in which itself is constructed by a mortal singer evolving during the act of poetic creation. Immediately after the Bard begins presenting the narrative of *Paradise Lost*, the ambiguities in the text begin. The Bard never offers his

²³ *Two Poets*, 26.

listeners comments or narration whose motivations are entirely transparent, and often his comments appear contradictory. Following Satan's first speech, for example, the Bard makes the first of his "degradations" of Satan.²⁴ Reacting to Satan's speech, the Bard remarks:

So spake th' Apostate Angel, though in pain,
Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despair. (I.125-126)

A.J.A. Waldock, in his *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*, sees this comment as attempting to be equal with Satan's speech. He goes on to say that the "degradation" of Satan's speech is incompatible with the content of the speech itself,²⁵ as it attempts to qualify the speech in terms of vanity and pride that Waldock does not see existing in Satan's language. In contrast, Stanley Fish views this passage as a correction of the reader's experience of Satan's speech: for him, this passage reads as if the Bard says "I know you *have been* carried away by what you have just heard; you should not have been; you have made a mistake, just as I knew you would."²⁶

Both Fish and Waldock view the speaker of this pair of lines as Milton the historical figure, and both falter as a result. Fish's presumption of an intensely didactic and corrective narrator is grounded in biographical information regarding Milton's Christianity (he does not, in *Surprised by Sin* at least, acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of Milton's Christianity), and he uses this as *a priori* knowledge justifying his reading of the poem. Waldock falls short in his interpretation because he does not recall the aims that the Bard pronounced in the first invocation, and thus, does not connect the Bard's goals with the complications of this "degradation." The Bard is, it should be kept in mind, a mortal man subject to the flaws of humanity; he does not possess God-like objectivity with respect to the content of his song.

²⁴ I repeat A.J.A Waldock's terminology here, outlined in *Paradise Lost and Its Critics* (Gloucester, Ma, 1959), 66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: the Reader in Paradise Lost* (New York, 1967), 9.

Speaking of Satan's first oration, Fish remarks "[i]t is not enough to analyse, as Lewis and others have, the speciousness of Satan's rhetoric. It is the nature of sophistry to lull the reasoning process; logic is a safeguard against a rhetorical effect only after the effect has been noted."²⁷ The Bard, as separate from Milton the historical figure, is not immune to the effects of Satan's rhetoric. While he may be attempting to qualify Satan's speech in this "degradation," it is a failed attempt. His aims as set out in the proem imply that he is of God's party; from this one can infer that he desires to color God in perfect shades and to degrade his antithesis, Satan, in the most unambiguous negative light. The two lines of this first degradation, though, form two cycles of concession, involving moves from negative characterizations ("Apostate," "Vaunting") to concessive acknowledgments of suffering ("though in pain," "but rackt with deep despair"). While Fish views these concessions as recognitions of and simultaneous corrections to the reader's reactions to Satan's speech, we should remember who speaks these lines—it is the Bard, and he is the first interpreter of Satan's speech. He may intend to lead his reader/listener through his song/text as Moses led the Israelites through Egypt and guide them to the proper interpretation of the events represented, but the empathetic concessions in this degradation reveal that the Bard cannot wholly distance himself from Satan, nor can he relay the speech with total skepticism. Though he is of God's party, he cannot help but sympathize with Satan. His acknowledgment of Satan's pain implies a deviation from the Bard of the proem. Even in these 100 lines since the conclusion of his invocation, the poet of this poem has markedly changed.

This change is also seen in epic similes employed in Book I. Epic similes are a convention of epic poetry, although they take on special meaning in *Paradise Lost*. Anne Davidson Ferry writes that the epic similes "are a means of characterizing the narrative voice, of enriching his tone, of insisting on his presence and enlarging his role as our interpreter and

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

guide.”²⁸ The comparisons that the Bard makes say as much about the Bard as they do about the things compared. The epic similes grant insight into the nature of the Bard’s poetic creation, to his relationship with his own poem and its subject matter. His epic similes “are always presented as if to make some notion clear,”²⁹ though in reality they always complicate the interpretation of the compared things, be they Satan’s shield, spear or his legions of rebel angels. The “characterization of the narrative voice” in Book I, then, is of a floundering narrator quickly losing control of the direction of his poem.

As the two lines comprising the first “degradation” gives an indication of the Bard’s ambivalence, so does the first epic simile of *Paradise Lost*, where he speaks of the enormous size of Satan, who is

as huge
 As whom the Fables name of monstrous size,
Titanian, or *Earth-born*, that warr’d on *Jove*,
Briareos, or *Typhon*, whom the Den
 By ancient *Tarsus* held, or that Sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
 Created hugest that swim th’ Ocean stream:
 Him haply slumb’ring on *Norway* foam
 The Pilot of some small night-founder’d Skiff
 Deeming some Island, oft, as Seamen tell,
 With fixed Anchor in his scaly rind
 Moors by his side under the Lee, while Night
 Invests the Sea, and wished Morn delays... (I.197-208)

The aim of the first part of this epic simile (l. 198-200) can immediately be discerned: the Bard approximates the size of Satan by comparing him to the Titans, and the schema is Satan=Titans. The second half of the simile (200-208) is much more ambiguous. Clearly the Bard offers *Leviathan* as another comparison to illuminate the size of Satan to his audience, but what is the purpose of modifying “*Leviathan*” with the miniature story of the Pilot “of some night-founder’d

²⁸ *Milton’s Epic Voice*, 69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Skiff” mistaking the beast for an island? James Whaler argues that this modification better depicts Satan as a deceiver.³⁰ He fully explains all levels of homology between Satan and Leviathan, but he makes no comment on the one deceived, the Pilot. If Satan= Leviathan, what or who is the Pilot homologous to?—the Bard. He exhausted many of his resources constructing himself as a prophet who intends to guide the reader/listener through the course of the narrative, a leader not unlike the pilot of the skiff. And after all the ways in which he convinces his audience of his epic attributes and inevitable success, he too falters after seeing and hearing his “*Leviathan*,” Satan. Moreover, this simile comes less than two hundred lines after the completion of the proem, and that proximity alone intensifies the suggested equation of Bard and Pilot. This analogy continues the complication of the relationship between the Bard and his work that began in his first comment on Satan’s speech, further intimating the possibility of a fallible Bard who, though desiring to render Satan as unambiguously monstrous, cannot do so to the extent that he believes he should. The Bard never loses sight of his imperative to be the representative of God to mankind, but the act of creating *Paradise Lost* forces him into a state of instability with respect to his role as narrator.

Shortly after creating his analogy of Satan’s size to Leviathan, the Bard uses another epic simile to illustrate the size of Satan’s shield, whose

broad circumference
 Hung on his shoulders like the Moon, whose Orb
 Through Optic Glass the *Tuscan* Artist views
 At Ev’ning from the top of *Fesole*,
 Or in *Valdarno*, to descry new Lands,
 Rivers or Mountains in her spotty Globe. (I.286-291)

As was the case in the epic simile of lines 197-208, the base comparison is easily understood: the size of Satan’s shield resembles the size of the moon. Whaler’s analysis of the structure of this

³⁰ James Whaler, “The Milonic Simile,” *PMLA* 46.4 (1931), 1050.

epic simile notes the lack of homologues to several components, including “*Tuscan Artist*,” “*Fesole*,” and “*Valdarno*.”³¹ His complex diagram of this simile fails to recognize, however, the simile’s most significant element, the telescope (“*Optic Glass*”). Whaler sees this as but an insignificant elaboration of “*Moon*.” I see, instead, the telescope at the core of this simile, as it facilitates everything that comes after its introduction. The “*Tuscan Artist*” is the observer using this tool. The interchangeability or equivalence of “the top of *Fesole*” (a mountain) and “*Valdarno*” (a valley) exists only when Galileo uses his telescope, which allows him to see the details of the “spotty Globe” from either position.

Geoffrey Hartman notes that this is one of many similes in the first books of *Paradise Lost* that contain some relation (imagery, language, etc.) to distanced observation, what Hartman, borrowing from Coleridge, calls the *ab extra* quality;³² Linda Gregerson elaborates Hartman’s argument by writing that the observer quality is doubled, for we readers observe one observing, and it is the reader who determines Galileo’s position as being in Valdarno or on the top of Fesole.³³ Each of these critics makes astute observations about the *ab extra* similes of Book I, but Hartman’s conclusion in particular—that the observer similes exist to remind us of “divine imperturbability”³⁴—does not account for the speaker of the simile. Hartman’s reading implies a speaker assured of his project and his ability to successfully assert “divine imperturbability” via the epic simile. Even by this early point in *Paradise Lost*, there have been traces in the text that show this is not the case, that this “oral narrator evince[s] sympathy with Satan at many points” and “it often alarms him.”³⁵

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1053.

³² Geoffrey Hartman, “Milton’s Counterplot,” *Milton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louis Martz (New York, 1966), 102.

³³ Linda Gregerson, “The Limbs of Truth: Milton’s Use of Simile in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Studies* XIV (1980), 144.

³⁴ “Milton’s Counterplot,” 101.

³⁵ *Two Poets*, 61.

While Milton the historical man may have had no hesitation about asserting the imperturbability of God, his epic narrator feels the temptation of Satan in Book I. Explaining God and His Providence may be the Bard's epic goal, but the image of Galileo's telescope does not explain his view of God at this point in the poem. Rather, the telescope tells the reader/listener something about the narrator and the type of song he wants to sing: he wants the same type of distanced observation that the telescope offered Galileo, for, he imagines, a removal from the immediate proximity of Satan and his crew would allow him to sing in a manner that degrades Satan rather than sympathizes with him. The telescope then is a metaphor for the type of narration the Bard desires for his own poetry. But clearly he cannot have the telescope because his Muse places him in Hell to experience all of its aspects and the potential sympathies it inspires. He is unlike Galileo, whose telescope allowed him to objectively note the spots on the moon from any position ("the top of *Fesole*" or "*Valdarno*"), the Muse sets the Bard in the middle of Hell, and he cannot divorce himself from the emotions that Satan evokes in him. He carries through Book I all the incertitude that these emotions force within him.

The degree of this uncertainty, about his role as Christian poet and his ability to justify God's ways, spills out most obviously in an epic simile that occurs not long after the two already discussed. Turning now to Satan's legions of rebel angels, the Bard sings of Satan calling out to

His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intrans't
 Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
 in *Vallombrosa*, where th' *Etrurian* shades
 High overarch't imbow'r; or scatter'd sedge
 Afloat, when with fierce Winds *Orion* arm'd
 Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves o'erthrew
Busiris and his *Memphian* Chivalry,
 While with perfidious hatred they pursu'd
 The Sojourners of *Goshen*, who beheld
 From the safe shore thir floating Carcasses
 And broken Chariot Wheels... (I.301-311)

In contrast to the two previous similes mentioned, the first comparison of this simile, what Whaler identifies as one of the many simple pattern analogies³⁶, does not possess the immediate transparency of those similes likening Satan's size to the Titans' sizes and the size of his shield to the moon. What qualities of the "Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks / In *Vallombrosa*" are the readers/listeners intended to isolate and accept in this simile? Merritt Hughes believes the comparison of the Legions to Autumnal Leaves is an allusion to Dante,³⁷ who compares the souls of the damned being herded by Charon:

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
until the branch stands bare above its tatters
spread on the rustling ground...³⁸

Dante's use of the image in context clearly articulates its intention of portraying the helplessness of the souls in hell. This likely is the intended effect of the image in *Paradise Lost*, but the Bard worries that his own pastoral image (regardless whether it is an allusion to Dante) does not characterize the Legions of Satan negatively enough. Hartman reads this as one more simile that "sharpen[s] our view of the innumerable stunned host of hell,"³⁹ but he ignores the multiple resonances of the pastoral image and "*Vallombrosa*" itself.⁴⁰ Furthermore, any intended allusion to Dante is compromised by the immediacy of the pastoral imagery, leaving the reader/listener of the poem wondering what value exists in comparing the fallen angels to leaves in an Italian stream. The Bard realizes this potential problem, and subsequently corrects his initial comparison by radically altering the direction of the second analogy, comparing the damned angels to the floating corpses. This kind of drastic course correction does not occur in the

³⁶ "The Miltonic Simile," 1039.

³⁷ *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, 219n.

³⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno* 3.109-111. Trans. John Ciardi. (New York, 2003), 34.

³⁹ "Milton's Counterplot," 104.

⁴⁰ Peter Herman sheds light on the multiple resonances of *Vallombrosa*, and the implications of such, in *Destabilizing Milton* (New York, 2005) 31-32, in which he reads the simile alongside Milton's recollections of his travels to Italy in *Pro populo Anglicano defensio secunda*.

‘Leviathan’ simile, where the first and second comparisons (to the Titans and to Leviathan) both use mythological entities with universally negative connotations to characterize Satan. Here, by contrast, the Autumnal Leaves of the first part of this epic simile bear little resemblance with the Carcasses of *Memphian* Chivalry that come to dominate the imagery of the second half of this epic simile, especially considering that the syntax first reveals them as actively pursuing the Israelites, before depicting them as floating Carcasses. The “or” of this epic simile then indicates a redirection, a correction made by a narrator aware of the inadequacy of his initial comparison.

The second half of the simile harbors associations with the Bard himself, as he indirectly compares himself to Moses, who led the Israelites through the parted Red Sea, while Pharaoh’s “Chivalry” pursued them.⁴¹ Here Moses is conspicuously undistinguished from the thousands of other “Sojourners of *Goshen*” witnessing the deaths of the charioteers. Certainly this is a departure from the “Shepard” triumphantly teaching “the chosen Seed, / In the Beginning how the Heav’ns and Earth / Rose out of *Chaos*” (I.8-10). Wherever Moses is, he is not, in this simile, at the head of the “Seed” leading them away from the shore. Though the Bard does not distinguish him from the rest of his tribe, Moses does hold a position on the “safe shore,” from which he witnesses and the “floating Carcasses.” The “safe shore” is not unlike the telescope of the earlier simile, which I argued is a metaphor for the Bard’s desired objective distance. The Bard characterizes himself even more extensively in this imagery. He absents Moses, whose prophet-leader essence the Bard used to construct his own triumphant image in the proem, from this simile as a means of displaying his own desire to descend from his position as guide to his audience. At this point in his song, The Bard would willingly exchange the glory of distinction for the “safety” of distance, but cannot. Instead, this epic simile further shows the Bard staggering under the weight of his own project, as quickly falling from his lofty flight as Icarus.

⁴¹ Exodus 14:6-31.

The characterization of the Bard in his epic similes continues in this vein throughout Book I, and extends into Book II where the Bard describes Satan flying through a Lucretian chaos. The similes do not universally or uniformly undermine the Bard's authoritative position as oral narrator of the poem,⁴² but many images the Bard uses in them reveals him as deceivable, fallible, and most importantly, self-aware about these imperfections and the implications they have for his narration.

This growing self-consciousness and anxiety furthermore has important implications to the development of the remainder of *Paradise Lost*, implications related to what McMahon calls "the crucial shift" within the poem "from a Christian *epic* to a *Christian epic*."⁴³ While our narrator declares himself in the proem a poet singing on behalf of God, his overture acts as much to valorize himself through inflated diction and allusion as anything else. Engaging with his Muse's vision and creating his poem begins to degrade his own confidence and sense of authority with respect to the song he sings.

II.

Through the remainder of Book I, the Bard continues to relay the details of the Satanic crew "[c]hain'd on the burning lake" (I.210), and subsequently informing us of the "great consult" of devils assembled at Pandemonium at the end of Book I. Fittingly, the language of Book II very closely resembles that of Book I. Following Mammon's speech arguing that the

⁴² Stanley Fish convincingly argues, in *Surprised by Sin*, 22-27, that the syntax of the simile comparing Satan's spear to a Norwegian pine momentarily allows the reader to be tempted by the impressiveness of Satan and his weaponry, only to correct him or her by ending with "were but a wand." The Bard does successfully educate the reader/listener at certain moments in Book I, but Fish does not acknowledge even the potentiality of an imperfect narrator— something which a large number of the similes suggest.

⁴³ *Two Poets*, 26.

fallen angels should “not then pursue / By force impossible” (II.249-250), the rest of inhabitants of Hell are roused to vocalize their support,

as when hollow Rocks retain
 The sound of blust’ring winds, which all night long
 Had rous’d the Sea, now with hoarse cadence lull
 Sea-faring men o’erwatcht, whose Bark by chance
 Or Pinnacle anchors in a craggy Bay
 After the Tempest[.] (II.285-290)

This passage has clear affinities with several of the epic similes of Book I, the Leviathan and Autumnal leaves similes especially. In all three, individuals are portrayed standing at a distance from the central image, some observing carnage (the sojourners of Goshen), some entirely unaware of a threat at hand (the Pilot). This epic simile contains elements from both of these previous similes, as the Sea-faring men observe the threatening sea becoming calm (comparable to the floating Carcasses of the second half of the Autumnal leaves simile) and yet appear unaware of the promise of storms to come, as the hollow rocks which “retain / The sound of blust’ring winds” signify. The Bard consistently returns to images of the sea and sailors in his epic similes throughout the poem, but here he makes it evident that he draws upon material already sung. As he continues through Book II, he combines, alters, and rearranges many of the lines and much of the language from Book I, revealing not simply a vague association between the two books, but rather an authorial development that begins in the first book and continues on throughout the remainder of the poem.

Similarly, the language of the Bard’s invocation to Book III mirrors much of the language of the book that precedes it, though it and the other invocations are often treated separately from the narrative proper.⁴⁴ When the Bard begins the third book by singing, “Hail

⁴⁴ See, for example, Stella P. Revard, “Milton and the Progress of the Epic Proemium,” *Milton Studies* XXXVIII (2000), 122-140; Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton’s Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* (Ithaca, 2007), 203-232; Barbara Keifer Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton, 1985), 25-39.

holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first born, / Or of th'Eternal Coeternal beam / May I express thee unblam'd?" (III.1-3), he is reacting to and incorporating the imagery of light that appears at the end of the second book, the same light that Satan takes advantage of in his attempt to escape Chaos:

But now at last the sacred influence
Of light appears, and from the walls of Heav'n
Shoots far into the bosom of dim Night
A glimmering dawn...

.....
With tumult less and with less hostile din,
That *Satan* with less toil, and now with ease
Wafts on calmer wave by dubious light. (II. 1034-1037; 1040-1042)

Likewise, Satan's ascent from Chaos closely matches the Bard's ascent from Hell, figured as a literal, physical ascent, when he says that he "with bolder wing / Escap't the *Stygian* Pool" (III.13-14). At this moment in the poem, the Bard and Satan are inseparable. The anxiety that informs the construction of the epic similes in Book I has not dissipated, but rather has grown more intense as the narrative progresses and the likenesses between the two becomes more apparent. The language of the invocation to Book III adopts the language of the earlier book because it exists parallel to, and not separate from, the narrative of Satan's flight from Hell.

Of course, critics who see the invocations as a set of lyric-like insertions quite apart from the main narrative do so not without good reason. Even as the diction of the invocation to Book III resembles that of the latter half of Book II, it perhaps more obviously harkens back to the first twenty-six lines of the *Paradise Lost*. The metaphor of flight, references to a time prior to the Creation⁴⁵, and even the images of raised land formations set alongside those of streams and brooks— all bind the invocation of Book III to the invocation of Book I; the invocation to each

⁴⁵Milton's personal belief in a time prior to the creation of Genesis 1:1 can be found in *YP* 6:308, 311.

book is spoken by the same voice. Does this, however, negate the linguistic association established between the Bard and Satan throughout Books I and II?

Through the course of the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, and then on into the third book, Milton endows his Bard with a permanence of presence and the capacity to develop in response to the narrative which he sings. Milton asks his reader to see the Bard silently embedded within the narrative of Satan's flight in conjunction with the two invocations in the first three books of the poem, for Milton creates the Bard as both fallible and self-aware. The invocation to Book III, then, is but the climax of anxiety that has been metastasizing continuously for 1800 lines. The opening "Hail" of Book III is almost ironic—far from triumphant, the invocation that begins a new direction within the poem is a faint plea arising from the darkness of Chaos, calling out for direction and guidance.

Indeed, the imperative "Hail" is not the directive for the Bard's readers/listeners to affix their attention to "holy Light," but rather a cry for holy Light to turn and answer the Bard. His first sentence, which initially reads like a declarative sentence, emerges as a question by the third line: "Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born, / Or of th'eternal Coeternal beam / May I express thee unblam'd?" (III.1-3). As Stephen Fallon correctly points out, the third line is syntactically ambiguous. He asks, "Does the question refer only to the second line, the attempt to describe the Son's light as co-eternal with the Father's? Or does it refer to the entire enterprise of expressing God at all?"⁴⁶ Fallon ultimately leaves his own question unanswered, but he notes that several centuries of "editors discount the fear of transgression."⁴⁷ The lines themselves, situated in the context of following Book II (and not simply the first invocation), unambiguously suggest this very fear. How can the Bard complete his poetic project if he not

⁴⁶ *Milton's Peculiar Grace*, 219.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

only questions his ability to represent God, but moreover cannot distance himself from the Adversary who, like himself, upwardly ascends in ambition?

Underscoring the syntactical ambiguity, Milton departs far from the regularity and confidence of strict iambic pentameter in these first three lines. The first line is especially telling. Unlike the first line of the first invocation, which departs from regular meter only in the second foot to emphasize “first,” the meter of the first line of this invocation is nearly unrecognizable as a variant of iambic pentameter: “Háil hólý Líght, óffspríng of Heáv’n first-bórn.” The eight stresses of the line drag the poem onward toward the irreducibly ambiguous third line. As can likewise be seen in the opposite manner in twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth lines of the first book, Milton here incorporates meter as a means of tonal reinforcement: the Bard moves onward in his project in uncertainty, an uncertainty which does not escape even the meter of his lines.

The meter of the opening lines follows Milton’s larger trend of using significant metrical variation as a means of expressing confusion on the part of the one speaking. In the invocation to Book III, the Bard directs his speech to Light in a manner quite unlike that of the first invocation, and the meter is only one way in which Milton accomplishes the differentiation. Structure is essential to an understanding of this invocation, perhaps almost as much as the content itself. In place of the Virgilian tropes and the allusions to *Orlando Furioso* is the tripartite structure of the Christian hymn honoring the name of God, a structure consisting of the exordium, narrative myth, and peroration. Barbara Lewalski examines this structure in some detail and notes that this form, though it finds its basis in ancient hexametrical poetry, became widely used in the English Renaissance by writers like Spenser, who employs it in his *Fowre*

Hymnes.⁴⁸ The Bard follows the structure of first naming different attributes of the heavenly body being invoked, then then going on to detail the myth of his ascent up from Hell, before finally beseeching the heavenly figure for guidance. But the placement of this hymn-like structure of the invocation to Book III calls into question the need for such an appeal, a point that Lewalski misses. If, as he initially claims, the Bard has “escap’ t the *Stygian* pool” “with bolder wing,” why does he immediately ask for assistance from holy Light? He goes on to make the pathetic claim that though he “revist[s] safe” the terrain of Light he has long been without Light’s “piercing ray” (III.21,24). Yet only after the events of Books I and II does he feel so insecure that he makes a direct plea for aid which will allow him to “tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight” (III.54-55). Milton’s Bard is divided against himself. While he wants to believe that he has come back from Hell without a blemish, and so argues that point initially, but the incorporation of the hymn structure into his poem suggests that he has been so marked by his poetic journey thus far. He bears the seemingly undivorceable affinities with Satan in his language and his imagery and though he still maintains his efforts to tell a narrative unlike any of those told before his, he cannot do so in the same manner with which he began. The invocation’s structure, which would have been easily identified by seventeenth century readers, provides but one indication of the Bard’s altered state.

But does the hymn to Light afford him the security and stability that the Bard so craves? The syntax of the latter half of the invocation would seem to suggest that the hymn does not entirely resolve the problems which precipitated the prayer in the first place. As was the case in the first three lines of Book III, the Bard’s statements about his own ability to preserve through blindness complicate their message through their deliver, as the following passage does:

⁴⁸ *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, 31.

Yet not the more
 Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt
 Clear Spring, or shady Grove, or Sunny Hill,
 Smit with the love of sacred Song (III.26-29)

For a statement asserting the speaker's confidence and authority, "Yet not the more" is markedly tangled. As John Guillory sees it, this characteristic of the syntax "can be associated with the original ambivalence of the poet-prophet"⁴⁹ articulated earlier in the invocation. Though part of the purpose of appealing towards heavenly Light is to cleanse himself of Satanic influence, the Bard's syntax continues to hold similarities with the convoluted syntax with which Satan made his arguments at Pandemonium. Linguistically, metrically, and syntactically the Bard remains in Hell though he has come into the realm of light. Through these formal complications which seem to contradict and undermine the content they express, Milton stresses the Bard's ambivalent state at this moment in the poem. The final destination of the story, the poem, and the creative enterprise is at this point in the poem unknown, although the invocation to Book III suggests a teleological anxiety, one which promises to persist until the poem's closure.

For those readers who perceive little or no distinction between the historical Milton and the epic narrator, however, the first fifty-five lines of Book III are little more than an autobiographical aside on Milton's blindness. Of critics writing with this assumption, Joseph Wittreich is the most generous, remarking that "[the invocation] undermines, quite intentionally, earlier attempts to identify Milton with Satan."⁵⁰ But Wittreich does not linger on this consideration and, in a move typical of biographical critics of Milton, he moves on quickly to compare various allusions made in the Book III invocation to similar references in Milton's prose. There exists a general discomfort with facing the Book III invocation on its own terms, as existing within the context of *Paradise Lost*, and many critics remain inclined towards

⁴⁹ John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York, 1983), 125.

⁵⁰ Joseph Wittreich, " 'Reading' Milton: The Death (and Survival) of the Author", *Milton Studies* XXXVIII, 27.

wrenching the Hymn to Light from the moment of the poem in which it appears. Despite the affinities between Milton's biography and prose writing to this passage, it must be kept in mind that the voice of the invocation to Book III is the same voice which spoke in the first twenty-six lines of the poem and the same voice that uttered the famous similes of Books I and II. The voice does not remain the same throughout the poem and Milton wants to call our attention to why it changes. By reducing the references of blindness, and by extension the entire invocation, to mere biographical references, we do a disservice to Milton's creative enterprise, which always prompts questions of knowledge, truth, and authority. Though Milton drew upon his life experiences for imagery and language within *Paradise Lost*, we mustn't forget Milton's belief that books "doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are:"⁵¹ he breathes life into *Paradise Lost* by asking his reader to see its production as the evolving experience of a creator, one continues through Book III to remain unsure about the project of creating such an ambitious poem.

III.

The space between the second and third invocations of *Paradise Lost* marks the longest stretch between the Bard's extended orations, and yet his voice is not all together absent in the period in between. Indeed, a few hundred lines after the Bard finishes his hymn to Light, he reemerges to remark upon the willingness of the Son to be sacrificed to save mankind:

O unexampl'd love,
 Love nowhere to be found less than Divine!
 Hail Son of God, Savior of Men, thy Name
 Shall be the copious matter of my Song
 Henceforth, and never shall my Harp thy praise
 Forget, nor from thy Father's praise disjoin. (III.410-415)

⁵¹ *John Milton: Prose; Major Writings on Liberty, Politics, Religion, and Education*. Ed. David Loewenstein. 185.

This authorial intrusion contains association on several levels with the invocation which precedes it. The Bard's joyous expression follows the same format of the first five lines of the opening of Book III, yet it inverts the earlier passage's tone and syntax. The earlier moment was interrogative. While John Mulder reads the opening question of Book III as rhetorical⁵², I find in it the expression of serious concerns about the poetic project of *Paradise Lost*, concerns that are wholly absent in this spontaneous outpouring at the Son's offer. With this passage, Milton reminds us that the Bard's psychological grappling with the content of his poem is not always one and the same with the poem itself. His tone and syntax here are transparent and direct, composed in a manner similar to Adam and Eve's prayer in Book IV. There as here, ecstasy and celebration trump any notions of self-consciousness. But for the Bard these moments are fleeting.

When Raphael arrives to speak with Adam and Eve, the Bard cedes the position of narrator. Just before we hear his voice again, Raphael closes his account of the war in Heaven by telling how Satan lies in wait, ready to create for Adam and Eve "eternal misery,"

Which would be all his solace and revenge
 As a despite done against the most High,
 Thee once to gain companion of his woe.
 But list'n not to his Temptations, warn
 Thy weaker; let it profit thee to have heard
 By terrible Example the reward
 Of disobedience; firm they might have stood,
 Yet fell; remember, and fear to transgress. (VI.904-912)

The Bard's invocation is not set, as some critics would seem to think, in the context of a simple and pleasant discussion Adam shares with Raphael. No, as is the case with the invocation in Book III, the third invocation in Book VII arises from a reminder of impending destruction. At the end of Book II, Satan was rising from the depths of Chaos to violate the perfect realm of

⁵² John R. Mulder, "The Lyric Dimension of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* XXIII, 154.

Eden. Here, the history of the fallen angels acts as a threat for the future. Indeed, the Bard takes to heart Raphael's last line – "remember, and fear to transgress." For the Bard, however, both of the last two lines resonate for him and his creative project. He boasted in the invocation to Book I that he would not fall like Icarus. What's more, his metaphorical language of flight in both of the first two invocations would logically have set him at a distance from Satan's crew metaphorically standing or falling, but as the invocation to Book VII illustrates, nothing is certain any longer.

The uncertainty of the narrator, at times unspoken in earlier invocations and hidden within syntax, meter, and lexicon, pushes to the forefront of the opening to Book VII. In a manner like that of Book I, the sentiments of the narrator are contained most visibly within the allusions of the passage. Here, two primary allusions structure the invocation: the first reference is made to Bellerophon.

The myth of Bellerophon has evolved over millennia to accrue several different variants, but the primary version referenced in Bard's simile – "Lest from this flying Steed unrein'd, (as once / *Bellerophon*, though from lower Clime) / Dismounted on th'*Aleian* Field I fall" – originates in Pindar's ode *Isthmian* 7.⁵³ Pindar's ode stresses the qualities and stories which Milton draws upon, namely the ownership of Pegasus and the myth of Bellerophon being thrown from Pegasus after presuming himself worthy to sit amongst the gods, and the endless wandering in solitude that followed for Bellerophon. All of these major components are present within the third invocation of *Paradise Lost*. We are actually cued to the allusion even prior to the mention of Bellerophon's name in line 19 when the Bard says (in language mimicking his own words in Book I),

⁵³ Stella Revard, "Milton and the Progress of the Epic Proemium," 132-135 provides a useful survey of the versions of the myth available to Milton and other writers of the seventeenth century.

Descend from Heav'n Urania, by that name
 If rightly thou art call'd, whose Voice divine
 Following, above th' *Olympian* Hill I soar,
 Above the flight of Pegasean wing. (VII. 1-4)

Prior to his direct comparison between himself and Bellerophon, he envisions himself reigning in Bellerophon's legendary horse, and sailing above the hill of the Muses, just as he says he would do in Book I. But as Bellerophon was thrown from Pegasus, the Bard admits the possibility that he has presumed to know too much, to take on a task too great for him. As a consequent of this presumption, he risks being thrown off course, down to the Alein field, "erroneous there wander" (VII.20) with Bellerophon forever. The delayed, parenthetical citation of Bellerophon's name enacts exactly the same fate which the presumptuous man met, the same which the Bard now faces: the threat of not being heard, forced to wander without a voice.

In the very next line following the completion of the Bellerophon allusion, the Bard implies the importance of the allusion to his own work: he reminds us that "Half yet remains unsung." Milton's Bard is not here merely reminding us that we're half-way reading the poem, but more importantly that the poem is only half-created at this point. Threats from all around jeopardize the project. Coming amidst Raphael's stories about the creation of the world and the chaos that engulfed the time prior to creation, the Bard's reflection on the creation of his own poem is set at the crux of creation and chaos. Regina Schwartz has argued that the battle between creation and chaos is always implicitly present in the poem, but perhaps never more so than in this invocation: "to say that Milton's creation is imperiled even as he describes it is not to say enough: it is *especially* when Milton thematizes creations, both the cosmic one and his own, that the danger is most acute."⁵⁴ The allusion to Bellerophon activates this indeterminacy within the poem: the Bard does not know at this moment in the poem if he will finish and be the prophet

⁵⁴ Regina Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theology and Poetics*, (Chicago, 1993), 61.

to mankind, or if he will wallow in obscurity alongside an already, by that point, obscure classical figure.

While the myth of Bellerophon was readily available to Renaissance readers, it was not as well known as the myth to which the Bard alludes in the second half of the invocation. He asks his muse Urania to

drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of *Bacchus* and his Revellers, the Race
Of that wild Rout that tore the *Thracian* Bard
In *Rhodope*, where Woods and Rocks had Ears
To rapture, till the savage clamor drown'd
Both Harp and Voice; nor could the Muse defend
Her Son.

(VII. 32-38)

Although he does not refer to Orpheus by name, the Bard relays all the pertinent details of the story of Orpheus' demise as found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book XI, one of the classical texts most cited in the Renaissance. This allusion has long been interpreted by biographical critics as a reference to the courtiers of Charles II, who threatened to disrupt the creation of *Paradise Lost* through Milton's imprisonment for his republican prose tracts. Yet the critics that see this reference often fail to acknowledge that Milton had long been interested in Ovid's story of Orpheus' death. In his poem *Lycidas*, published at least two decades prior to the Milton's composition of this invocation, the speaker of that poem sings:

Had ye been there—for what could that have done?
What could the Muse herself that *Orpheus* bore,
The Muse herself, for her enchanting son
Whom Universal nature did lament,
When by the rout that made the hideous roar,
His gory visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift *Hebrus* to the *Lesbian* shore?

(*Lycidas* 57-63)

Milton may have integrated this myth into *Paradise Lost* at this point in the poem because he felt endangered by the forces of the Charles II, who would place their leader back into power in 1660. This being said, the “over-positive identification”⁵⁵ of this line with Milton’s biography loses the context of the *Paradise Lost* in which this invocation appears. Situated between Raphael’s stories of dissonant war in Heaven and the creation of the World later in Book VII, the allusion to Orpheus’ death makes sense in the context of the poem itself.

But if this is so, what does the relationship between the allusion to Bellerophon and the allusion to Orpheus have to do with the broader poem? Throughout *Paradise Lost*, the Bard has developed over the course of telling the story of Satan, the Garden, and Heaven. I would like to suggest that in way unlike the previous invocations, the writing of third invocation itself is an act of authorial development. Earlier invocations express the anxiety that had formed as a result of the narrative, but here the reflection on the creative process is the source of anxiety. Indeed, we need to understand that the move from the Bellerophon allusion to the Orpheus allusion is a progression of anxiety. Mulder poignantly summarizes this shift: “The first part ends with the suggestion of fear in the reference to Bellerophon’s presumption; the second closes with implied terror in the extended recall of the cruel death of Orpheus.”⁵⁶ That terror accumulates throughout the third invocation, and by the close of the passage, the Bard is left with little more than a prayer asking that he not meet the same fate of Orpheus. His feeble request directed to Urania in the final lines is muted by the overwhelming sense of inevitable failure which has been the focus of the invocation up until the last line and half. Surely Phillip Edward Phillips and others who take his position are dead wrong when they argue “Milton’s prayers have been answered”⁵⁷ in the final two lines of the invocation. They forget Raphael’s imperative to “remember” that

⁵⁵ *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, 346n. .

⁵⁶ “Lyric Dimension of *Paradise Lost*,” 156.

⁵⁷ Phillip Edward Phillips, *John Milton’s Epic Invocations: Converting the Muse*, (New York, 2000), 117.

which has been previously uttered, and in the invocation to Book VII what has been uttered is an unrelenting barrage of allusions to failures of ambitious men.

These allusions to stories of failure and death are hardly appropriate for earlier invocations, but the change which was only hinted at in earlier moments within *Paradise Lost* are fully realized in this third invocation: the fear of the Bard is firmly in place halfway through the poem. As this fear precipitates the performative use of allusion in this passage, the Bard's anxiety also forces questions regarding the poet's relationship with the Muse. The first invocation assumed the Bard's dominance over the heavenly muse and the ability to command her to illuminate what in him was dark. The second invocation suggests a slightly less certain relationship between the pair, wherein the Bard "both has and lacks the union with the divine that he seeks. He feels the lamp, and yet for the blind [Bard] its light is indistinguishable from the universal blank"⁵⁸ of his blindness.

The invocation in Book VII presents the arc of the relationship between the Bard and his muse which continues to change as the poem progresses. He begins with the authoritative command "[d]escend from Heav'n Urania" but the authority of imperative is undermined in the second line when the Bard admits that "Urania" might not be the name of muse to which he calls. Their relationship is further complicated when the Bard says that though he soars in his poem, he does so by "following" (VII.3) the muse. He himself then descends from flight and positions himself "standing on Earth" asking at this point Urania to "still govern" his song (VII. 23,30). The movement away from the metaphoric flight comes in response to the allusion to Bellerophon. He stands on Earth now because he realizes that only the presumptuous fly on Pegasean wings. He says that he is "not alone," and still operating under the guidance of Urania, but as he alludes to the death of Orpheus, he wonders aloud whether his presumptions have

⁵⁸ *Milton's Peculiar Grace*, 220.

damned him to a fate like Orpheus'. In the final lines of the invocation, the Bard tells his muse to "fail not thou, who thee implores." "Fail not" is a far cry from his imperatives earlier in the poem and gestures towards just how far the Bard has fallen in this invocation. Earlier he requested illumination but now he asks only not to be destroyed. Even this is uncertain. The closing words of his allusion to Orpheus pointed to Calliope's failure to protect her offspring. Though he differentiates Urania from Calliope, the invocation's last line, which states "For thou art Heav'nly, shee an empty dream" (VII. 39), functions as little more than a last attempt to resolve the fears which the Orpheus myth cements. If Calliope cannot protect Orpheus, what guarantee does the Bard have from Urania?

The third invocation thus concludes with the complete inversion of the first invocation's tone and allusive techniques: with an entire half of the poem yet unsung, the Bard is threatened on all sides round by the external world, as well as internally by his burdensome self-consciousness. He fears for his life and for his poem. And as Milton structures *Paradise Lost* in such a manner that this invocation comes just prior to the Raphael's retelling of the creation of the world, the act of creation is coupled with the threat of disorder, silence, and chaos. The Bard simply does not know in which direction the fate of his poem will swerve.

IV.

The final invocation of the poem, the one beginning Book IX, offers little in terms of an answer to the question implicitly raised in the opening to Book VII regarding the conclusion of the poem. The opening forty-eight lines of Book IX do not form an invocation in the strict sense of the word; the narrator does not invoke a muse, though the lines collectively function in a manner not unlike the openings of Books I, III, and VII. Critics studying Milton's epic narrator have long been inclined to pass over or merely touch on the opening of Book IX because on the

surface it appears that the necessity of the invocation is explained within the Bard's words. After Raphael ends his conversation with Adam in Book VIII, the narrative in a sense requires an overt shift in tone and emphasis, as the narrator himself remarks when he says,

No more of talk where God or Angel Guest
 With Man, as with his Friend, familiar us'd
 To sit indulgent, and with him partake
 Rural repast, permitting him the while
 Venial discourse unblam'd: I now must change
 Those Notes to Tragic; foul distrust, and breach
 Disloyal on the part of Man, revolt,
 And disobedience... (IX.1-8)

We are reminded that the invocations often serve the function of repositioning the larger narrative. At first glance, that is the lone goal of the final invocation. Absent from this invocation are the similes likening the narrator to legendary figures. Though there are indeed several references to other works of literature, the narrator avoids pulling himself into the invocation too much in this passage, instead opting for a strangely-placed evaluation on what defines 'heroic' literature. Overall the passage has a decidedly underwhelming tone and fits uneasily in the paradigm which the other invocations have created.

When critics do take it upon themselves to integrate the final invocation into their arguments, they often do so by including this in discussions on Milton's supposed "self-representation" in the poem. But strangely enough, critics fail to appreciate how the final invocation of Book IX contradicts the assumption of biographical critics who identify the poem's narrator as the historical Milton. After presenting an extensive list of the components of classical and medieval epics, the narrator comments, "Mee of these / Nor skill'd nor studious" (IX. 41-42). This line is spoken despite many digressions made in early works stating that Milton long intended to write an Arthurian epic before settling on the topic of the Fall of Man. A reference to

such aspirations can be found in the unquestionably autobiographical poem *Epitaphium*

Damonis, likely written in 1640. There, Milton writes

I, for my part am resolved to tell the story of the Trojan ships in Rutupian sea and of the ancient kingdom of Inogene, the daughter of Pandrasus, and of the the chiefs, Brennus and Arviragus, and of the old Belinus, and of the Armorican settlers who came at last under British law. Then I shall tell of Ingraine pregnant with Arthur by fatal deception, the counterfeiting of Gorlois; features and arms by Merlin's treachery. And then, O my pipe if life is granted me, you shall be left dangling on some old pine tree far away and quite forgotten by me; or else, quite changed, you shall shrill forth a British theme to your native Muses. (*Epitaphium Damonis*, 161-173)⁵⁹

By the 1660s when Milton was writing Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, the poet had long abandoned his earlier hopes of constructing a national epic. Yet he was, as this passage from *Epitaphium* suggests, both "skill'd" and "studious" in ancient and medieval epics. Furthermore, Milton's writing of the unfinished *History of Britain*, published in 1670, likely overlapped with the composition of *Paradise Lost*. Milton was steeped in the English medieval literature as well as, of course, the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. By issuing from the mouth of his narrator those lines claiming ignorance of the literature that Milton was so familiar with, the historical Milton points us to his intended separation of his biography from the narrative voice in the poem. Modern biographical critics, including Wittreich, Fallon, and Revard, all favor passing over lines IX.41-42 without comment.

Though the final invocation of the poem grants important insight into Milton's separation into his distinction between his own life and his narrator's experience with the poem, it also plays a role in the development of the narrative voice. While it does not develop the epic persona to the extent that Books I, III, and VII do, it is not entirely superfluous as Stella Revard believes.⁶⁰ Milton is always attuned to how a speaker's sentence structure affects the perception of an utterance's content, as he makes clear in the construction of Satan's speeches in Books I

⁵⁹ I here preserve Hughes' translation of the original Latin.

⁶⁰ "Milton and the Progress of the Epic Proemium," 131.

and II. In the invocation to Book IX, Milton places two conditional “if” clauses and these clauses are vital to an understanding of the Bard in this passage. First the Bard says that he will say that the remainder of his poem hinges on his inspiration from his “celestial patroness.” He will only be successful, he claims, “If answerable style I can obtain.” Though this clause is buried among the chains of subordinate clauses around it, the “if” clause actually modifies the main verb “change” in pair of lines redirecting the content of the poem towards the “Tragic” content of the final third of the poem. But as the narrator made apparent in the last lines of the third invocation, the aid of the celestial patroness is no longer certain, though he claims that she continually “dictates to me slumb’ring” (IX.23). The conditional clause in this long sentence again hearkens back to the unfettered anxious expression of the preceding invocation. While the muse has continued to guide him in his song, he is much more timid now than he once was, understanding that at any moment inspiration could be cut off, endangering the poem’s completion.

The Bard maintains his hesitant voice in the second “if” clause of the proemium, appearing in the second sentence. He closes out the second sentence by saying that

higher Argument
 Remains, sufficient of itself to raise
 That name, unless an age too late, or cold
 Climate, or Years damp my intended wing
 Deprest; and much they may, if all be mine,
 Not Hers who brings it nightly to my Ear. (IX. 42-47)

Just like he did in the third stanza, the Bard here end his oration by highlighting all the elements which might prevent him from completing the poem. The poet might not live long enough to see its completion; the climate might counteract his inspiration; the era might not look upon his poem with disinterest. All of these things might inhibit the prophecy that is *Paradise Lost*. And all of these considerations revolve around the poet’s centrality to the finished product. Mortal

factors might afflict the poem's delivery *if* all be the Bard's. Whereas earlier in the poem we might have expected the Bard to turn then to the Muse, he does not here. Earlier he raised questions about the muse's ability both to protect him and inspire him. Now he is reduced to simple declarations; there is no invocation. The Bard uses the conditional *if* because "it" indeed might all be his. His muse may leave him on account of his presumption or some other reason. And if that happens, "then nature may be subject to old age and the return of chaos after all."⁶¹ Though Milton does not grant us access to the mind of the Bard in the way he does in past invocations, the invocation of Book IX leaves us with the sense that everything continues to hang in the balance. The poem remains unfinished, and even in this final invocation, it remains to be seen whether or not the Bard will attain the "answerable style" allowing him to finish *Paradise Lost*.

V.

After the invocation to Book IX, Milton does not offer us another extended look at the narrator of *Paradise Lost* nor his views on his poetic project. The question of completion persists nonetheless: how will the Bard complete his narration of the Fall of Man? I would like to suggest that he needs celestial assistance beyond the aid that Urania offers him. His appeal for aid is not overt as it is in the first three invocations. But if we bear in mind that Milton maintains a distinct narrative voice that exists outside of the four invocations, we might understand how the narrator resolves his closure dilemma.

After Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit in the ninth book of the poem, God calls them to account for their actions. They fall into bitter argument with one another, and blame is exchanged. When all hope seems lost, Adam says to Eve

What better can we do, than to the place

⁶¹ *Remembering and Repeating*, 63.

Repairing where he judg'd us, prostrate fall
 Before him reverent, and there confess
 Humbly our faults, and pardon beg, with tears
 Watering the ground, and with our sighs the Air
 Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign
 Of sorrow unfeign'd, and humiliation meek.

(X.1086-1092)

Adam believes in the power of prayer. He believes that an gesture of contrition and sorrow will convince the Father to take pity on them. And so they pray. The narrator describes the pair failing on their knees in prayer after Adam finishes his speech, telling that

they forthwith to the place
 Repairing where he judg'd them prostrate fell
 Before him reverent, and both confess'd
 Humbly their faults, and pardon begg'd, with tears
 Watering the ground, and with thir sighs the Air
 Frequenting, sent from hears contrite, in sign
 Of sorrow unfeign'd, and humiliation meek.

(X.1098-1104)

Why in this pivotal moment of the poem does the narration repeat almost exactly the words which Adam spoke, with only the pronouns changed? Gordon Teskey identifies the trope of extended repetition with Homer; he also claims that the “ritual nature of prayer in the future ... contrasts with the easy eloquence of the prayers that Adam and Eve sing before the Fall.”⁶² But Teskey forgets who utters these lines. Again, it is the Bard who speaks these lines, whose voice Milton has so consciously constructed and sustained throughout the poem, and these lines say something about him. By describing Adam and Eve’s actions using Adam’s language, the Bard reveals himself to be so fully ingrained in the narrative that he cannot help but use the words just spoken by Adam. This moment is something like the opposite of the narrator’s exaltations in Book III in response to the sacrifice of the Son and in Book IV at the sight of Eve and her spouse engaged in the perfection of “wedded Love” (IV.751) beneath the blissful bower.

⁶² *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*, Ed. Gordon Teskey (New York, 2005), 259n.

Instead, in this moment the Bard's narration mimics the prayer of Adam and Eve and by so doing, the Bard falls down alongside the couple in prayer of "humiliation meek." The narrative needs an answer to the sad state that it is in, and the Bard mimes the first postlapsarian prayer.

Adam, Eve, and the epic narrator receive their answer when Book XI begins. The narrative is regenerated:

Thus they in lowliest plight repentant stood,
Praying, for from the Mercy-seat above
Prevenient Grace descending had remov'd
The stony from thir hearts, and made new flesh
Regenerate grow instead, that sighs now breath'd
Unutterable, which the Spirit of prayer
Inspired... (XI. 1-7)

The pair finds its reprieve from pain in prayer, as does the narrator. All need an answer to the situation at the end of Book X, and they all receive one when Michael descends from heaven to provide hope for the Adam and Eve and Milton's epic voice.

With Michael's descent, the poem truly rests in the hands of the heavenly realm. It marks the close of the development of the narrator's active participation in the poem. He is granted the lines "They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow, / Through *Eden* took thir solitary way," (XII. 668-669) but that comes only after Michael has given the promise that the Fall has been a fortunate one: mankind will yet have its greater Eden. The anxieties and insecurities which culminated within the narrator as the poem progressed are set free when he places his poem not in the hands of a muse, but in the hands of the God who dictates all other domains in the poem. The final gesture of the Bard is a contrite resignation of his poem to the will of God. Writing in *Areopagitica*, Milton remarks: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that

immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.”⁶³ Milton’s vision of experience and virtue holds true for the narrator’s experience in *Paradise Lost*. Milton purposefully constructed his narrator to illustrate the journey of one reaching God. The Bard of *Paradise Lost* seeks the garland that promises to greet him with the completion of the poem, but Milton does not allow him the prize so easily. Before he can “wander where the muses haunt” (III.27), the Bard must know the dust and heat of creation.

⁶³ *John Milton: Prose; Major Writings on Liberty, Politics, Religion, and Education*, 193.

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