The Decentralization of Morality in *Paradise Lost*

Jarod K. Anderson
Ohio University

The notion of evil in *Paradise Lost*, as has been said by countless scholars, is deliberately complex, at least on the surface; yet while the majority of explanations as to the abstruse nature of Milton's portrayal of evil in the poem have centered on a sympathetic Satan, a fortunate fall, or the assertion that the reader is fooled into falling through the subtle use of literary convention, that the true source of moral complication in the poem may lie in the struggle between Milton's need to uphold the authority of God while simultaneously legitimizing opposition to the will of God. Milton needs to vindicate elements in the poem contrary to God's will in order to add weight to the reader's choice either to figuratively uphold or reject divine law. These conflicting aims ultimately lend contrary thematic values to the poem that create a fascinatingly paradoxical and engaging narrative.

In order to create a legitimately questionable but ultimately beneficent God, Milton employs various representations of otherness—elements that are literally or figuratively outside of the rule of God. The fact that Milton creates a universe in which dwell sentient beings that are not created by God precede the rule of God, and/or are opposed to the will of God, greatly influences the moral structure of the poem. Given that there are entities in *Paradise Lost* which are essentially outside of God's system, God becomes *a* ruler, *a* creator, not *the* ruler, *the* creator. Ancient night is the eldest of things, not simply the eldest creation of God. The realm of Chaos is infinite. God's created system of existence, an affront to Chaos, is seemingly finite. Milton could certainly have chosen to leave these concepts as pure abstraction; yet he chose to give them voice, give them agency. This validation of otherness, in turn, lends textual credence, if not literal plausibility, to the desires of Adam, and the "stygian council" when they propose embracing nothingness (suicide) in order to escape God's rule. Moloc argues:

> What fear we then? what doubt we to incense
> His utmost ire? which to the highth enrag'd,
> Will either quite consume us, and reduce
> To nothing this essential, happier farr
> Then miserable to have eternal being.

Or if our substance be indeed Divine,
And cannot cease to be, we are at worst
On this side nothing.... (2.94-101)

Ancient Night, Chaos, and all their associates and subjects exist outside of God's created system. Although God may not allow egress from his creation, the idea itself is not outside the realm of possibility in the universe of the poem; it is available to be contemplated by the reader. In each case, the character abandons the notion as impossible because, being in the power of God, escape from the moral universe in which he finds himself is barred. Yet, given that these instances of character-contemplated otherness are preceded by explicit, tangible, personified, validated otherness, such thoughts of escape, though prevented by God, are granted textual credibility by representative analogs. For example, the personification of "uncreated night" (2.150) exists outside of God's created universe and, with her co-ruler Chaos, holds dominion over an "illimitable ocean without bound" (2.892) all of which represents otherness. Thus, when Eve considers escaping the rule of God through Death, the idea that one may exist outside God's system has already been upheld by Milton's choice to include firm examples of otherness in the poem. Eve proposes:

Let us seek Death, or hee not found, supply
With our own hands his Office on our selves.... (9.1001-1002)

The reader may be aware that God will not allow his creation to escape his judgment and, indeed, Adam reinforces this fact: "so thinking to evade / The penaltie pronounc't, doubt not but God / Hath wiselier arm'd his vengeful ire then so / To be forestall'd" (9.1021-1024). In addition, this trope is echoed in the debates of the council of pandemonium:

... our final hope
Is flat despair: we must exasperate
Th' Almighty Victor to spend all his rage,
And that must end us, that must be our cure,
To be no more; sad cure; for who would loose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through Eternity,
To perish rather, swallow'd up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated night,
Devoid of sense and motion? and who knows,
Let this be good, whether our angry Foe
Can give it, or will ever? how he can
Is doubtful; that he never will is sure. (2.142-154)

Yet, of course, the "wide womb of uncreated night" is hardly devoid of sense or motion.

By associating divine retribution with the hope of escaping to an alternative system of existence (or non-existence), a possibility already validated by personified otherness, Milton reinforces the subjective nature of God's imposed moral schema. Yet again, the reader's assessment of God's justice is validated by elements of otherness in *Paradise Lost*. Adam and Eve consider metaphorically embracing otherness through death; the reader is reminded that otherness exists in the universe of the poem. Satan continually wishes to escape the rule of God; the reader recalls that sentient beings, not created by God, exist outside of God's system, predating his rule. As Adams points out, "Chaos is present or potentially present throughout Milton's poem" (Adams 621). The presence of otherness makes God's position, and moral authority, relative.

I am not arguing that God does not have the authority to determine right and wrong within his created system of existence, but simply highlighting the fact that since God's system of existence is not the only form of existence presented in *Paradise Lost*—due to the Milton's explicit use of otherness—the narrative does not create a logical mandate that necessitates that the reader figuratively ally him or herself with God simply because of unquestionable divine authority and ethos. This rhetorical framework has led some critics to question the beneficence of Milton's God and the true motive of Milton's defense of divine justice. William Empson, for example, asserts,

> A sympathetic reader of Milton's prose is accustomed to feel that he writes like a lawyer or a politician, concerned to convince his reader by any argument which would serve, though really more humane or enlightened arguments are what have made Milton himself choose the side he is arguing on. But every decent man is against what he has to maintain; there is an "outcry" against it; but what he has found in the Bible is the horrible truth about the justice of God, and men had better learn to face it. (Empson 615)

Empson misinterprets Milton's intentions. While otherness does highlight that Milton had a choice to make in defending God by legitimizing the context of that defense—the debate surrounding God's justice—this fact does not undermine Milton's defense or the justice of God in the context of his created universe. Empson further asserts that "the poem, to be completely four-square, ought to explain why God had to procure all these falls for his eventual high purpose" (Empson 612). The poem does address this issue:

> ... they themselves decreed
> Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,

> Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
> Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.
> So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,
> Or aught by me immutablie foreseen,
> They trespass, Authors to themselves in all
> Both what they judge and what they choose.... (3.116-123)

Empson's misreading comes, in part perhaps, from an incorrect interpretation of otherness. At no point in *Paradise Lost* does Milton undermine God's authority within his own universe. To accuse God of being somehow sinister within the context of the poem is to accuse him of being inconsistent. God, in terms of his created plane of existence is

> Author of this Universe,
> And all this good to man, for whose well being
> So amply, and with hands so liberal
> Thou hast provided all things.... (7.997-1000)

Milton's God is not inconsistent. He is the author of all that is good and, by extension, has the power to determine what is or is not good within the bounds of his creation. God is the benchmark of goodness within his own universe. Otherness does not give the reader the freedom to judge God's interpretation of his own brand of goodness; it gives us the holistic freedom to judge the complete, consistent system by which God creates and applies his own subjective morality. Though God's goodness is explicitly sound, concrete, and consistent within his own creation, otherness positions the reader well outside of that creation and allows us to judge the system entire, functional and consistent though it may be. After all, a system, a machine, may be both functionally sound and utterly undesirable.

In this sense, it is important to foreground the perspective from which my argument approaches the text: it applies to the relationship between reader and poem, the process by which we create and interpret meaning through our interactions with the text. While otherness does not influence the characters of the poem in a way that significantly alters their roles/experiences within the narrative structure of the poem, it greatly affects the reader's perception of the moral structure of the narrative. By expressly attempting to justify the ways of God to men, Milton positions the reader outside the framework of his narrative universe—a universe that defines God, in part, by recognizing elements that are not God. Milton, by asking the reader to judge the ways of God on a universal scale, explicitly positions us outside the bounds of the universe/reality of the poem. The scale of Milton's endeavor necessitates that, as judges of issues of

universal import, the readers take an "outside looking in" approach to the poem. While obviously this degree of removal can be sighted in any reader/text relationship, the perspective of the reader in *Paradise Lost* is an intentional construct of the author—a construct created by coupling God's created universe with elements outside of God's system (otherness). The judgment Milton calls upon the reader to make requires a measure of relativity. Without otherness, there is no relativity. If God's system is the only system within the narrative (and by extension the world outside the poem, the world of the poem's reader/arbiter), there is no way for the reader to question God's actions and certainly no need for the poet to defend them. Considering the poem's constant thematic endorsement of free choice, Milton is hardly likely to frame a narrative around a false question. Otherness validates the question, validates the reader's judgment of divine justice.

Milton's choice to include an element of otherness in *Paradise Lost* causes the notion of evil (on a universal/narrative scale) to become subjective, a matter for the reader to decide. As such, the reader is faced with a legitimate choice. If the reader chooses to align him or herself with God in the narrative, he or she must do so freely based on God's merits, not on authorial insistence or unquestionable moral/divine authority. It is fair to say, as evidenced by the many tendentious comments in the poem, that authorial intention is firmly on the side of God: "for what can scape the Eye / Of God All-seeing, or deceave his Heart / Omniscient, who in all things is wise and just" (9.5-7). Yet Milton, as one who philosophically placed the utmost importance on the need for unrestrained choice, created a narrative climate in which good and evil are not absolute. Good and evil are part and parcel of God's created system; yet, otherness grants the reader the freedom to view all of God's creation (including his notions of good and evil) as a singularity—an object whose value is to be assessed, its ethical credibility weighed in the individual, subjective scales of the reader's judgment. This structure creates a wonderfully engaging sense of subjective consequence; the poem both validates the reader's moral response and demands a conclusion. In this sense, Milton has skillfully created a narrative setting in which his task is, indeed, to justify the ways of God to humanity.

Adams further asserts that Milton, "in allowing the negative power of Chaos to assert itself, muffling and muting the active imperial rhetoric on both sides, can be appreciated as an extraordinary touch of art" (Adams 632). Yet, in arguing that Chaos represents "a hidden third force" (Adams 632) in the poem, he is far too dismissive of the overarching significance of this argument. Rather than following this line of thinking to a conclusion that elucidates the ideological framework

of the narrative, Adams dismisses his own observations by relegating them to a Miltonic "touch of art." However, the final statement of Adams' analysis does begin to acknowledge the significance of Chaos as an agent of otherness:

> [Chaos'] agency, precisely because it isn't tied to explicit benevolence or malice, makes easier that response of ours, which mingles rueful regret, reaffirmation to the "right" cause, and an awareness that nobody's intention corresponds very closely to what we have to live with. (Adams 632)

Otherness legitimizes our response, whatever it may be. Otherness grants Milton the freedom to speak in favor of God's justice with certainty without undermining the central question that necessitates a defense of that justice. As Gordon Teskey states concerning the nature of Milton's writings:

> They are at base a theoretical project because Milton is a theoretical poet. His poetics is very much of a piece with his revolutionary politics, his libertarian conception of human nature, his spectacular conception of the physical world, and his sublime notions of ultimate reality and God. (Teskey 1)

Given the nature of the poet and the logic of the narrative, we must be free to reject God's system of morality. Only otherness gives us the ideological liberty necessary to reject God or accept Milton's defense.

Framing God's creation, God's universe, within a larger uncreated narrative universe allows the reader to appreciate and uphold, or criticize and dismiss, the ways of God and Milton's defense thereof from the perspective of an explicit outsider. This perspective, masterfully created by Milton's employ of ideological otherness, grants the poet the rhetorical freedom to speak with certainty concerning the goodness of God without dismissing or undermining the poem's implicit question of universal moral authority and justice. Through otherness the poem validates the central debate of the narrative and the reader's response without sacrificing coherence or undermining God's justice within his own system.

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