

"Images of Matter": Narrative Manipulation in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*

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THAT *Paradise Lost* contains a War in Heaven is not surprising for the episode has the sanction of epic tradition and biblical authority. Nor is it surprising that the War is described in what Dr. Johnson had called "images of matter."¹ Theological and artistic tradition had further sanctioned the depiction of the warring angels as classical warriors complete with armor, steeds, and chariots. Moreover, Milton had hedged by having Raphael suggest that if the War was not literal in its description, then it was metaphoric: "What surmounts the reach / Of human sense, I shall delineate so, / By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (V.571-73).² Yet once Raphael's narration of the War begins in Book VI, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to respond to the War as being in any sense metaphoric or symbolic. The vehicle (epic warfare) serves to condition and confine our response. Everything in Raphael's narration of the War is confined within material "limits." The effect is intentional and not simply the result of the choice of the vehicle. What Milton does in Book VI is to utilize narrative technique involving language and perspective to help define part of the "lesson" which the War carries for us as readers.

Book VI begins with what seems to be a gratuitous touch, a description of how Heaven's "grateful vicissitude" is produced:

There is a Cave
Within the Mount of God, fast by his Throne,
Where light and darkness in perpetual round
Lodge and dislodge by turns, which makes through Heav'n
Grateful vicissitude, like Day and Night;
Light issues forth, and at the other door

Obsequious darkness enters, till her hour
 To veil the Heav'n, though darkness there might well
 Seem twilight here; and now went forth the Morn
 Such as in highest Heav'n, array'd in Gold
 Empyreal, from before her vanisht Night,
 Shot through with orient Beams

(VI.4-15)

The passage is marked by the personification of abstract nouns: "Morn," "circling Hours," "Light," and "darkness." Both the description and the process itself insist on the dissimilarity between Heaven and Earth. The "grateful vicissitude" is like day and night, but not identical to them. Nature here is defined by its animation; it is personified. Far from being gratuitous, the description here serves as part of the frame for the narration. The use of language and the concepts that it embodies serve as contrasts for what follows in the book. In the very next lines we are quickly plunged into a particularity: "the Plain / Cover'd with thick embattl'd Squadrons bright, / Chariots and flaming Arms, and fiery Steeds" (VI.15-17).

Even God in his first speech offers us a perspective which accords with the limited terms of the vehicle:

Go *Micheal* of Celestial Armies Prince,
 And thou in Military prowess next,
Gabriel, lead forth to Battle these my Sons
 Invincible, lead forth my armed Saints
 By Thousands and by Millions rang'd for flight;
 Equal in number to that Godless crew
 Rebellious, them with Fire and hostile Arms
 Fearless assault, and to the brow of Heav'n
 Pursuing drive them out from God and bliss,
 Into their place of punishment, the Gulf
 Of *Tartarus*, which ready opens wide
 His fiery *Chaos* to receive thair fall.

(VI.44-55)

Not only is God's charge misleading (the loyal angels will not be able to "drive them out"), but even the word "fall" now lacks its characteristic resonance. As the narrative of the War progresses, the terms and even the struggle itself become increasingly literal, cut off from any moral or spiritual significance. The narration is designed to permit Satan's illusion. Early in the book Abdiel offers the correct perspective

when he taunts Satan:

Fool, not to think how vain
 Against th' Omnipotent to rise in Arms;
 Who out of smallest things could without end
 Have rais'd incessant Armies to defeat
 Thy folly; or with solitary hand
 Reaching beyond all limit, at one blow
 Unaided could have finisht thee, and whelm'd
 Thy Legions under darkness

(VI.135-42)

Abdiel expects, quite rightly, that the struggle should not even take place. God's moral superiority should be self-evident. Abdiel's point, however, is missed by Satan. When he replies to Abdiel, his words are those of an Homeric warrior: "But well thou comst / Before thy fellows, ambitious to win / From me some Plume" (VI.159-61).

As the War vividly demonstrates, one of the immediate consequences of disobedience for Satan and his legions is a "fall" from spiritual essence toward materiality.³ This movement is the counterpart to Raphael's suggestion to Adam, made in the narrative frame of the War, that unfallen man might in time ascend on the scale from body or matter toward spirit: "Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit" (V.497). The War in Heaven is a narrative example of the principle in reverse. The fallen angels are "now gross by sinning grown" (VI.661). It is only the fallen angels who experience fear and pain: "Then first with fear surpris'd and sense of pain / Fled ignominious, to such evil brought / By sin of disobedience, till that hour / Not liable to fear or flight or pain" (VI.394-97). The presence of pain in the fallen angels is noted a number of times in the narrative and each time it is linked to physical discomfort rather than emotional: "then *Satan* first knew pain" (VI.327); "uncouth pain" (VI.362); "and pain, / Till now not known" (VI.431-32); "in pain, / Against unpain'd" (VI.454-55); "quell'd with pain" (VI.457); "pain is perfet misery" (VI.462); and "wrought them pain / Implacable" (VI.657-58).

Although both the unfallen and the fallen angels wear "armor," in the narrative it is only the fallen angels who "bleed" (VI.333) or who are "mangl'd with ghastly wounds through

Plate and Mail" (VI.368). In contrast, the "inviolable Saints" are:

Invulnerable, impenetrably arm'd:
 Such high advantages thir innocence
 Gave them above thir foes, not to have sinn'd,
 Not to have disobey'd; in fight they stood
 Unwearied, unobnoxious to be pain'd
 By wound, though from thir place by violence mov'd

(VI.400-05)

The armor of the fallen angels is represented as a material limitation. After the ultimate escalation, when the landscape becomes a weapon, the fallen angels are trapped: "Thir armor help'd thir harm, crush't in and bruis'd / Into thir substance pent, which wrought them pain / Implacable, and many a dolorous groan, / Long struggling underneath" (VI.656-59). The armor of the unfallen angels is, on the other hand, suggestive of the spiritual armor that obedience to God provides. As Micheal later explains to Adam:

The promise of the Father, who shall dwell
 His Spirit within them, and the Law of Faith
 Working through love, upon thir hears shall write,
 To guide them in all truth, and also arm
 With spritual Armor, able to resist
 Satan's assaults, and quench his fiery darts

(XII.487-92)

The narration tells us little about the experiences of the loyal angels in the War; the point of view which we share, especially from line 413 of Book VI on, is that of the fallen angels. Such a manipulation is an interesting violation of the narrative context: that is, Raphael's experience of the War should be limited to the winning rather than the losing side. To be fallen, as we and the Satanic host discover, is to be tired epic warriors, "Far in the dark dislodg'd, and void of rest" (VI.415) at the end of the first day's battle, even though Heaven has only "grateful vicissitude" and not day and night. That there is a disparity between the loyal and disloyal angels is clear. Nisroch complains of the "unequal arms" which force them to "fight in pain, / Against unpain'd, impassive" (VI.454-55). However, when Satan realizes that his legions are "less firmly arm'd"

(VI.430), he can conceive of that disadvantage only in purely physical or material terms:

Perhaps more valid Arms,
 Weapons more violent, when next we meet,
 May serve to better us, and worse our foes,
 Or equal what between us made the odds,
 In Nature none: if other hidden cause
 Left them Superior, while we can preserve
 Unhurt our minds, and understanding sound,
 Due search and consultation will disclose.

(VI.438-45)

The irony of "understanding sound" reveals the true disparity. Satan sees no inequality in the angelic natures because his perspective is literal (angels are angels) rather than spiritual. Here as elsewhere in the poem Milton gives Satan and the fallen angels a vocabulary of theologically charged words — words which have both a literal and spiritual meaning — which are used in a purely literal context. Thus, for example, Mammon equates the "light" of Heaven with literal light: "Cannot we his Light / Imitate when we please? (II.269-70). The implication of such a use of language is that with their fall Satan and his legions no longer understand the moral givens of their situation. Their irony is unintentional; it reveals their new, partial comprehension. Given this limitation, Satan can find a compensation for this discrepancy only in a deeper commitment to the material. However, Satan's creation is a parody of God's. If God's presence is sufficient to reveal the spiritual that underlies the material, Satan sees only the material that underlies the spiritual:

Which of us who beholds the bright surface
 Of this Ethereous mould whereon we stand,
 This continent of spacious Heav'n, adorn'd
 With Plant, Fruit, Flow'r Ambrosial, Gems and Gold,
 Whose Eye so superficially surveys
 These things, as not to mind from whence they grow
 Deep under ground, materials dark and crude,
 Of spiritous and fiery spume

(VI.472-79)

For Satan those who "superficially" survey see only the "Gems and Gold," ignoring the "spiritous" potential which underlies Heaven. From such "materials" Satan creates "implements of mischief" to "o'erwhelm whatever stands

Adverse" (VI.489-90). Such irony, including the purely literal "stands," is continued in Satan's belief that his material creation (the cannon) is equivalent to God's moral force.

Satan's presentation of his new creation comes in "ambiguous words." To Milton's early editors and critics, the puns of Satan and Belial were the most offensive sections of the poem. Hugh Blair called the "witticisms of the Devils" an "intolerable blemish."⁴ The puns are offensive because they violate poetic decorum. Yet their use is an example of a dramatic language appropriate to character and context. Puns, the rhetorical figure *antanclasis*, were associated by some rhetoricians with playful, light-hearted poems. Susenbrotus, for example, remarked that they were found in "games and sports."⁵ Their frequency of use here constitutes a vice of language — an abuse. Dramatic language characterizes a speaker. In Satan's case, his language reveals him to be at one moment, the eloquent orator; at another, the comic buffoon; at a third, the archetypal seducer. The use of puns is even more complex in that they become a parody of what Anne Davidson Ferry has called the "sacred metaphor" — that is, those theologically charged words which operate on both a literal and a spiritual level.⁶ Satan's puns are a complete inversion for behind them is a material referent (the ammunition) and not a moral one:

Stand ready to receive them, if they like
 Our overture, and turn not back perverse;
 But that I doubt; however witness Heaven,
 Heav'n witness thou anon, while we discharge
 Freely our part: yee who appointed stand
 Do as you have in charge, and briefly touch
 What we propound, and loud that all may hear.

(VI.561-67)

Belial continues the punning with a final ironic twist on the words "understand" and "upright":

Leader, the terms we sent were terms of weight
 Of hard contents, and full of force urg'd home,
 Such as we might perceive amus'd them all,
 And stumbl'd many; who receives them right,
 Has need from head to foot well understand;
 Not understood, this gift they have besides,
 They show us when our foes walk not upright.

(VI.621-27)

The loyal angels' response to Satan's increasing reliance on the material is a response in kind. They begin to use the landscape of Heaven, the hills, as weapons: "From thir foundations loos'ning to and fro / They pluckt the seated Hills with all thir load, / Rock, Waters, Woods, and by the shaggy tops / Uplifting bore them in thir hands" (VI.644-46). The image of angels carrying mountains is, at least for one critic, the final absurdity in the continuing "confusion of spirit and matter": "Grimly he [Milton] works out some of the gross implications of his derivative idea without bothering to perceive the situation clearly. Here picture is subordinated to concept as carelessly as anywhere in the whole enormous work."⁷ I doubt, however, that readers are really troubled by such a scene. What strikes us is not the immensity of the mountains, but rather their smallness. The angels can bear them "in thir hands." The hills of Heaven have been reduced to clods of dirt, just as the "originals of Nature" (VI.511) are reduced to gunpowder. Nature is again inanimate; it is not productive but destructive. The mountains have become weapons of warfare and not as allegorical or even symbolic terms.

It is only after this final material escalation that we are again made aware of a perspective larger than that of Satan. Suddenly the narration moves back to God who sits "shrin'd in his Sanctuary of Heav'n secure" (VI.672). God has "foreseen," "permitted," and "limited." We are now told what has been withheld thus far in the narration. The resolution will not be found in the literal, for the conflict exists only because God has "permitted" it. The collapse of Satan's epic plans comes when the War moves beyond all "limit," beyond its literal meaning and assumes its moral significance. When the Son rides forth in the "Chariot of Paternal Deity" (VI.750), the language changes and abstraction and animation return to what has become literally the material of Heaven: "At his command the uprooted Hills retir'd / Each to his place, they heard his voice and went / Obsequious, Heav'n his wonted face renew'd, / And with fresh Flow'rets Hill and Valley smil'd" (VI.781-84). With the presence of the Son the larger perspective is restored to the narrative. The physical or material is now completely subsumed in the moral

truth:

forth rush'd with whirl-wind sound
 The Chariot of Paternal Deity,
 Flashing thick flames, Wheel within Wheel, undrawn,
 Itself instinct with Spirit, but convoy'd
 By four Cherubic shapes, four Faces each
 Had wondrous, as with Stars thir bodies all
 And Wings were set with Eyes, with Eyes the Wheels
 Of Beryl, and careening Fires between;
 Over thir heads a crystal Firmament,
 Whereon a Sapphire Throne, inlaid with pure
 Amber, and colors of the show'ry Arch

(VI.749-59)

The descriptive technique here is the exact opposite of that used in the middle portion of the narration. Until this point, the War in Heaven has been treated in specific, fallen terms. We can understand, we can visualize because the War that is described is Satan's war, a physical struggle with an epic adversary. However the "Chariot of Paternal Deity" defies visualization. The Chariot is "undrawn"; there is now no need for "steeds." It is self-moved ("instinct with Spirit") because it is pure spirit. The Son's weapons are never explicitly described. They are represented instead as the force of Logos which makes physical resistance impossible. Their effect is to reveal moral truth: "Every eye / Glar'd lightning, and shot forth pernicious fire / Among th'accurst, that wither'd all thir strength, / And of thir wonted vigor left them drain'd, / Exhausted, spiritless, afflicted, fall'n" (VI.848-52).

The narration of the War in Heaven functions as an exemplum—its lesson clearly stated in Raphael's final lines in Book VI: "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.909-12). This much has always been obvious. What has not been is the lesson provided not by any overt gloss but by the very narrative technique which Milton employs in the episode. The War in Heaven is Satan's war. It exists because God has "permitted" and "limited," and because once Satan has fallen, he sees God as an epic adversary to be warred against. The War is absurd because it is an attempt to redress a moral or spiritual disparity by physical means. Raphael's narrative is reductive; it

intentionally confines our reading experience. Language loses its spiritual significance just as nature loses its animation and is reduced to clods of dirt. We are forced to see the War not as an archetypal struggle of the forces of good and evil but as a specific, physical battle. The narration moves from "spirit" down to something rather close to "flesh." Satan descends into our fallen world as he wages epic warfare, blindly and absurdly, against a moral force. The collapse of Satan's epic illusion comes only when God reaches beyond all "limit" and the metaphor regains its moral significance. The narrative technique in the episode emblematically represents the fallen nature of the experience described.

NOTES

- ¹"Life of Milton," as quoted in John T. Shawcross, ed., *Milton 1732-1801: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 306.
- ²All quotations from Milton's poetry are from *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957). Future references to book and line numbers will appear in the text.
- ³The idea of such a "fall" was fairly common in angelology. Robert H. West in *Milton and the Angels* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1955) persuasively argues that Milton was influenced in his portrayal of the fallen angels by the writings of Michael Psellus. Professor West quotes from Agrippa who, in turn, is paraphrasing Psellus: "The bodies of devils in a manner material, as shadows, and subject to passion, that they being struck are pained, and may be burnt in the fire. . . . And although it be a spiritual body, yet it is most sensible, and being touch, suffers; and although it be cut asunder, yet comes together again, as air and water, but yet in the mean time is much pained" (p. 71).
- ⁴*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, as quoted in Shawcross, p. 247.
- ⁵See, for example, the entries in Lee A. Sonnino, *A Handbook to Sixteenth Century Rhetoric* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 193-94.
- ⁶*Milton's Epic Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), Chapter IV.
- ⁷Wayne Shumaker, *Unpremeditated Verse* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 129.