

Fall 2015

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Recommended Citation

Plavcan, Sarah (2015) "Mortal Reason and Divine Infinity: Justifying the Ways of God to Men in Book VI of Paradise Lost," *Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 19 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol19/iss1/7>

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**Mortal Reason and Divine Infinity:
Justifying the Ways of God to Men in Book VI of *Paradise Lost***

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Abstract

In his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, Milton's goal was to "justify the ways of God to men" (*PL* I.25-26). For his seventeenth-century Protestant audience, this meant reconciling both the paradox of human free will and divine foreknowledge and the paradox of human suffering and God's goodness. Although God's speech in Book III makes an explicit argument declaring God's justice, this paper will show that Book VI, the War in Heaven, completes this argument by attempting to move the poem's readers beyond the limits of human reason into a divine understanding of the universe. Through temporal compression and confusion, created by the language of Book VI and Satan's creation of the cannon, the poem elevates the reader from mortal temporality to divine infinity. This perspective, which approximates God's omniscience, just as the War in Heaven simulates human suffering, allows post-lapsarian humans to understand intuitively how those paradoxes may be harmoniously resolved.

[I]nto hollow engines long and round
Think-rammed, at th'other bore with touch of fire
Dilated and infuriate [they] shall send forth
From far with thund'ring noise among our foes
Such implements of mischief as shall dash
To pienes and o'erwhelm whatever stands
Adverse...

(*PL* VI. 484-490)

So Satan commands the construction of the most discordant weapon of the War in Heaven in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*: the cannon, which was a state-of-the-art weapon of mass destruction for Milton's contemporaries. In Raphael's account, the heavenly angels are indeed dashed about and nearly overwhelmed by the devilish creation, but Milton's reader is also unsettled by the cannon, having been immersed just moments before in a poem written in the style of a Homeric epic and set in the Garden of Eden.

Even more jarring than Raphael's description of Satan's terrifying invention is the aside that follows shortly afterward. Raphael switches mid-line from narrating the admiring thoughts of Satan's followers to addressing Adam directly. He warns him that "if malice should abound," that is, if mankind should fall into sin, it is likely that some future human will develop an earthly form of the cannon "to plague the sons of man" (*PL* VI.501-506). Raphael then returns to his narrative

without missing a beat. This comment is baffling. It jolts the reader out of the flow of Raphael's story and draws attention to the fact that he is relating events where the outcome—Satan's defeat—has already been foreshown in the poem, reducing the tension of the conflict.

While there are other direct addresses to Adam in Book VI, one near the beginning and one near the end, this one stands alone both in placement and in the degree to which it breaks the flow of the epic narrative.

¹ Raphael's reference to Adam as his listener in the last lines of the book coincides with the end of the story of the War in Heaven. His other switch into the second person is near the beginning of the book, and comes as part of an epic simile comparing the ranks of marching angels to the birds that came flying to Adam in paradise "to receive / Their names of thee" (*PL* VI.75-76). Although this does detour from the narration to some extent, it is a much smoother interruption that more neatly integrates past and present, Heaven and Eden, through the medium of the simile. In contrast, after over

¹The narrator sometimes refers to himself in the first person or makes a reference to the fact that he is telling a story—for example, when he remarks that darkness in Heaven is like "twilight here" (*PL* VI.12). However, these moments are not as jarring as those in which we are suddenly reminded that for hundreds of lines, we have been hearing Raphael's narration rather than the general narrative voice chosen by Milton to represent himself more directly.

four hundred lines of uninterrupted epic presentation that draws us into an illusionary intimacy and erases Raphael and Adam, the transition from narration to direct address during the construction of the cannon is disorienting in its suddenness, to the point that it seems almost sloppy.

There are some obvious explanations for this brief passage about post-lapsarian human war, just as there are some clear and unsubtle reasons for the inclusion of the cannon. The cannon could be a reflection by Milton on the horrors of seventeenth-century warfare, or perhaps he simply wanted to give his great villain access to the most terrifying weapon of his time. Likewise, Raphael's aside could have been included merely to point out to Milton's readers that the horrors of modern warfare are a result of human sin, or, within the narrative, to be a specific warning for Adam about the dangers posed by Satan.

Yet the placement of the passage makes little sense if these were the main reasons for its inclusion. The idea that the sufferings of war are the result of the fall would be such a familiar and well-accepted concept to Milton's readers that it is difficult to imagine why he would willingly interrupt the rhythm of the epic narrative to point out the obvious. As an intratextual warning to Adam, it is equally surprisingly placed because at this point Satan has only introduced the idea for the cannon. While his description of its purpose is certainly alarming, Adam has yet to hear about its actual destructive impact. Raphael's prediction would be much more effective later on in the book, after he relates how the cannon's "roar / Emboweled with outrageous noise the air" as "her entrails tore disgorging foul / Their dev'lish glut: chained thunderbolts and hail / Of iron globes" and the angels "fell / By thousands" (*PL* VI.586-587, VI.588-590, VI.593-594). As it is, Milton placed the passage to be as disorienting to the reader as possible.

By reminding the readers that we are with Adam, listening to a story about the past, Milton creates a moment in his poem where his readers are simultaneously aware of and experiencing the past (the War in Heaven), the present (Raphael and Adam's conversation), and the future (Milton's time, when cannons are in use). In other words, the effect of the passage is not just to warn Adam, but also to give the poem's readers the faintest taste of God's omniscience. We do not become omniscient, but for a moment the poem allows us to get as close as possible to the

experience of what it might be like to exist in multiple times simultaneously.

This elevation into a divinely omniscient perspective is not merely an interesting rhetorical trick. Rather, it is a significant facet of Milton's main argument in the poem. In the opening of *Paradise Lost*, Milton invokes his Muse, the Holy Spirit, to grant him "Eternal Providence" that he may achieve his goal for the epic: to "justify the ways of God to men" (*PL* I.25-26). Milton believed in a God that was infinite, eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient (Fallon 33). Yet he also believed that humanity fell of its own free will and that God both created the circumstances of, and foreknew, that fall. The paradoxes implicit in these beliefs—that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, yet humanity has free will; that humanity fell under the circumstances of temptation and divine foreknowledge of the fall, yet God is "just"—seem to surpass the abilities of human understanding.

The problem of divine justice, especially with regard to the fall, was being hotly debated during Milton's time (Gregory 178). Milton's Arminian beliefs regarding divine foreknowledge and mortal free will were in the minority in seventeenth-century England, especially in Puritan circles (Gregory 178). He rejected Calvinist predestination and believed absolutely in the freedom of will (Gregory 202-3). On top of this, he was also wrestling with the standard challenge of the Reformation theologian to present an all-powerful God that was not a tyrant, and who was wholly good despite the undeniable presence of evil in the world (Donnelly, *Milton's* 18, 78). Raphael tells Adam that the horrors of gunpowder warfare are a result of man falling into sin, but such anguish is difficult to reconcile with the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent and just Christian God.

With such difficult paradoxes to face, and sharing his beliefs with only a minority of his contemporaries, it is no wonder that, as Gregory points out, Milton felt a strong defense of God's justice was actually necessary (202). It was not, of course, necessary for God's sake—Milton is not putting God on trial, even to absolve him of wrongdoing. Even the frustrated, fallen Adam acknowledges that God needs no justifying in this sense (Reist 236). Instead, as Reist and many other scholars have recognized, Milton is justifying God for the sake of his contemporaries (238).

Milton's goal with *Paradise Lost* was to reconcile these paradoxes by telling the story of the fall,

the loss of Eden. For Milton, human understanding may not be enough to resolve these problems comfortably, but that is a failure of human understanding, not of God. Therefore, in addition to using more traditional, “discursive” kinds of reasoning and logic, he pursued this purpose by attempting to bring his readers closer to a timeless and infinite divine perspective through what Milton’s Raphael calls “intuitive” reasoning (*PL* V.488). Primarily through temporal manipulation within the narrative space of the poem, especially in Book VI, Milton sought to move his readers beyond the limits of human reason into an understanding of the universe and the Fall through approximate experience of God’s perspective, or at least experience closer than might normally be possible.

Milton’s views on reason provide a useful tool for interpreting the methods he employs to construct his “great argument” (*PL* I.24). In particular, an examination of what Milton meant by “intuitive” and “discursive” reveals why he would not have been satisfied with leaving his argument on behalf of God’s justice to explicit explanations, such as the one given by God in Book III. Furthermore, it demonstrates how an important facet of his attempt at justification would have been leading his readers to an implicit understanding through indirect poetic means, such as raising them closer to a divine perspective. Firmly establishing Milton’s beliefs about the relationship between human and divine reason is an essential prerequisite to understanding how these beliefs play out in the text of the poem.

[T]he soul
Reason receives, and reason is her being,
Discursive or intuitive: discourse
Is ofttest yours, the latter most is ours,
Differing but in degree, of kind the same.

(*PL* V.486-490)

So Raphael lectures the yet-unfallen Adam in the Garden of Eden. The angel simultaneously affirms that reason is an essential quality shared by human and divine beings, the “being” of the soul, while marking a clear distinction between its two degrees: lower human discourse and higher angelic intuition. These assertions, put into the mouth of an angel, are a window into Milton’s own beliefs about the degrees and uses of reason.

Milton’s distinction between intuitive and discursive reason stems from his Ramism and the idea

of “right reason.” Ramism, the logical system derived by Peter Ramus in the sixteenth century, rejected convoluted Aristotelian logic and focused instead on reason as the intuitive and natural understanding of the relationships between things (Duhamel 1036-37). While Milton disagreed with Ramus in several major respects and revised the Ramist method in his own *Artis Logicae*, he did agree with Ramus’s emphasis on intuitive perception.² His versions of reason and logic promoted the use of imagination and “cultivated understanding” over a reliance on intricate proofs (Fisher 38). He saw *a priori* axioms—that is, intuitively understood truths—to be superior to pure logic (Arnold 22). Logic is part of reason, but reason is much more, and of a much higher faculty, than just logic (Arnold ix). In the *Artis Logicae*, Milton distinguishes between the practice of “reasoning” and “dialectic,” the latter of which he regards as too limiting because it only refers to “the art of questioning and answering” (*Works* v.11, 19-21).

The concept of “right reason” is much older and much more well established than the ideas of Ramus. It has its origins in the Plato’s dialogues and was given its name by Cicero (Arnold 1). It is, most simply described, the “simultaneous act of right knowing *and* right doing”; right reason is, in a sense, righteous reason (Arnold 2). It is reason that approaches intuition through divinely granted inspired insight (Fisher 41). Christian church fathers adopted it and brought it into a Christian context. For example, Augustine’s *sapientia* is “the contemplation of the truth, tranquillizing the whole man, and assuming the likeness of God” (*The City of God* trans. Marcus Dods VIII.8, qtd. in Arnold 5). It is knowing and imitating God through “the aid of divine illumination” (Arnold 5). Milton’s definition of “sounder wisdom” in his *Proslution III* follows the same formula of the classical descriptions of right reason, combining the faculties of reasoning with moral actions (Arnold 18). Milton also follows his predecessors in identifying divinely inspired knowledge as greater than external discourse when he identifies, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit and “the unwritten word” as “a more certain guide” than scripture alone (*Works* v.16 281, 279).³

So when Milton has Raphael differentiate discursive from intuitive reasoning, he is distinguishing

²For a more detailed debate on the extent to which Milton diverged from Ramus, see Duhamel and Fisher.

between a lower, human way of knowing that relies on external discourse and is more closely connected to logic, and the higher, more complete right reason that is intuitive, imaginative, and divinely inspired. This conception of reason influences the text of *Paradise Lost*. It is discussed by characters in the poem, it influences the depiction of the characters—Satan, for example, displays only discursive reasoning—and, crucially, it impacts how Milton presents his justification of the ways of God to men.

The most obvious way Milton advances his argument is with God's speech at the beginning of Book III, where the Father explicitly explains his own justice, goodness, and even mercy in regards to the Fall. God declares, "freely they stood who stood and fell who fell," and says that "if I foreknew / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault / Which had no less proved certain unforeknown" (*PL* III.102, 117-119). Later on, he adds that "man shall not quite be lost but saved" and all those, not just an elect few, who are guided by God-given "umpire conscience" (that is, right reason) will be delivered (*PL* III.173-197). Milton thus uses God as an authoritative figure to express clearly and reasonably his Arminian beliefs of "conditional election, unlimited atonement, [and] the absolute freedom of the creaturely will" (Gregory 200-201). Omniscience and omnipresence, Milton's God is saying, are not equivalent to predetermination. These beliefs constitute the foundation of Milton's argument regarding why humanity should view God's ways, in particular as they relate to the Fall, as just.

However, Milton obviously did not believe this speech was enough to convince his readers of the justness of God's ways. If he had felt sanguine, as Donnelly has noted, the poem would "simply end at Book 3" (*Milton's* 102). Communicating the substance of an argument is not the same as communicating intuitive understanding and acceptance on a spiritual level. As Milton says in *Areopagitica*, a "man may be a heretic in the truth"; knowing something, and even believing in it, is meaningless without reason-based understanding (365). This is why God's speech does not, and cannot, stand alone as an argument. Furthermore, there is a tension in the discourse of Milton's God as he declares

that man has free will while nonetheless demonstrating his own foreknowledge. Below the surface there is an instability to the logic, an unconvincing portrait of an all-powerful being that declares in advance what others will supposedly freely do.

These passages in Book III are a form of divine self-revelation, but this revelation takes the form of an interrogative conversation (Donnelly, *Milton's* 101). According to Milton's differentiation between discursive and intuitive reason, this conversation is incomplete human reasoning, an external verbal discussion that, however important it may be, is of relatively lower degree because it is not internal enlightenment. Of course, within the poem, this discussion is effectively an intuitive experience for the Son and the angels, because they receive direct enlightenment from God. However, regardless of how the Son and the angels perceive God's revelation in this passage, the argument the reader is presented with is the poet's portrayal of this communication, just as we are presented with a poetic representation of God, not God himself. Thus, it is this discursive reasoning that serves to justify God to the reader, and this interrogative conversation alone does not fit with Milton's preference for intuitive and imaginative reason. It is incomplete, unless it is viewed in the context of the whole poem, where Milton expands his argument beyond discursive speech to facilitate implicit reason in his readers so they might know and understand, and not just have been told of, God's justice.

In Book VI, Milton lifts human reason up into the realm of divine knowledge through temporal confusion and compression. Milton makes an imaginative argument about the nature of divine justice by elevating his readers closer to an omniscient perspective and a divine understanding of time. It is an argument of experience and discovery, providing some of the demonstrative proof Milton believed to be necessary to supplement his prophetic testimony. Furthermore, it is a form of right reason, of knowing and imitating God. It is literally, to return briefly to Augustine's definition of right reason, "assuming the likeness of God."

Elevating his readers to a divine perspective provides Milton with a unique and powerful tool to succeed in his argument because of the traditional theological meaning of the term "justification." In Christian religious thought, justification is the "process through which fallen mankind is either made or declared righteous in the sight of God" (Bryson 92). As

³ For a fuller discussion that interprets the entirety of *Paradise Lost*, and in particular the Fall of Adam and Eve, through the lens of Milton's own writings on right reason and logic, see Arnold.

Bryson points out, by claiming his purpose as justifying the ways of God to men, “Milton is appropriating and reversing the process through which Man is reconciled to God. Rather than reconciling Man to God, Man is reconciling God to Man” (92). Or rather, “the ways of God,” as Milton was not so prideful as to claim the ability to accuse and acquit God, but rather was trying to alter “the way in which God is conceived of by human beings” (Bryson 94).⁴ In Christian theology, the way humanity is reconciled to God is through Christ, through the person of God coming down to the human domain and living among us. So if Milton, as I am arguing, is elevating humanity’s perspective closer to a divine viewpoint, he is not only reversing whose ways are reconciled to whom, but also the major element by which this reconciliation takes place.

Theological “defenders of the doctrine of moral freedom,” like Milton, have long depended on the difference between the human experience of time and the divine eternity to reconcile free will with an omniscient, omnipotent God (Bedford 63). From the perspective of a human in time “there is causality, suspense, sequence” in the way we experience the world, but God exists independent of time, of causality or sequence (Bedford 74). In human time, foreknowledge of an event implies that the event is predestined to happen. However, from the point of view of God, foreknowledge is simple perception (as there is no before or after), and such knowledge does not in any way circumscribe the free choice of moral actors.

Paradise Lost stresses God’s place outside of time. The poet originally introduces us to his God by declaring that “past, present, future He beholds” “from His prospect high” (*PL* III.78,77). And if this simple discursive declaration is not enough to express the difference between the human and the divine experiences of time, Colie points out that contrasting God’s speech

⁴ Donnelly argues that because Milton “assert[s]” Providence, God’s goodness, before he declares that he will justify the ways of God to men, Bryson’s interpretation of “justification” as declaring God righteous before the eyes of man is not plausible (*Milton’s* 81-83). That is, if Providence is asserted, God is not apparently evil and thus does not need to be justified in this way. I contend, however, that there is, again, a distinction between asserting something and having it be understood. Post-lapsarian humanity doubts God, and even those who believe in divine Providence may struggle to reconcile God’s inherent goodness with what appears to fallen men as divine evil.

in Book III, encompassing his view of the entirety of human history in just a few lines, with Adam’s view of history in an extensive sequential order that fills almost the entirety of Books XI and XII, allows the readers to experience such a disparity for themselves (132).

As postlapsarian humans, we are trapped in time, and the divine eternity is a cosmic mystery beyond the full comprehension of our mortal reason. Yet although I agree with Colie that God’s speech in Book III can help readers begin to understand something of the difference between a human viewpoint and an eternal one, I would argue that Milton’s understanding of intuitive logic empowers him to construct Book VI in a way that advances this goal much further. Whereas God’s words in Book III can be as problematic for readers as they are helpful, Book VI creates a unique sense of time that allows the poem to try to draw us nearer to experiencing that cosmic mystery, to go beyond our mortal scope and see what is inconceivable to the human eye. Since intuitive logic depends on personal experience leading to understanding, the poem creates a unique sense of time for the reader that mimics the divine perspective of eternity. After all, it “is in the medium of His eternity that God has foreknowledge” (Colie 128). Therefore, *Paradise Lost* brings us outside time to create a similar sense of foreknowledge. Modern scholarship has generally been very interested in the malleability of time throughout the entire poem, the way the present and the past are related, the blurring of chronology, and the sense of a unique “mythic time,” that is created in the poem (Welch 13). However, Book VI in particular manipulates its readers’ perception of time to help readers approach an omnipresent perspective.

Satan’s cannon, and Raphael’s aside to Adam about it, is one of the most striking examples of this in Book VI. As mentioned earlier, the reader foreknows the existence of the cannon before it is invented in the future by “Someone intent on mischief” (*PL* VI.503). Like Milton’s God, readers get to experience a moment outside of time where we know how an event transpires simultaneously before it occurs, while it occurs, and after it occurs. This temporal dislocation is compounded by the wording of Raphael’s aside. When he declares that “In future days...Someone intent on mischief or inspired / With dev’lish machination” will invent the cannon, the word “future” loses its normal function as a temporal marker (*PL* VI.502-504). The word simultaneously refers to Adam’s future, when mankind will create artillery, and to the seventeenth-century

reader's present, when cannons are being commonly used in European warfare. It also refers to the past, as the "someone" who "with dev'lish machination" devised such an instrument was in fact, according to the poem, the devil himself, Satan. Thus, for this brief moment in the poem, sequential time collapses and the reader experiences the birth of the cannon from a perspective close to divine omnipresence.

Beyond this particularly striking instance, a sense of collapsed time is diffused throughout all of Book VI. Much of this temporal confusion comes from the fact that both the language and style of this section are reminiscent of the classical Greek and Roman epics. On the surface, this is unremarkable, as Milton was intentionally setting out to write a great Christian epic. However, unlike Milton, Raphael is not relating the War in Heaven to seventeenth-century Englishmen. He is telling it to Adam, a newly made man who has never seen battle and has never read any epic poetry. When Adam remarks innocently to Eve that, "So near grows death to life, whate'er death is," it is made clear that Adam does not intuitively understand all concepts, that he does not know the meanings of words he has not experienced (*PL* IV.425). Nevertheless, Raphael's narrative is full of military terms. He tosses into the story images like "spears and helmets...and shields," "chariot," and "battalion" without giving Adam any sort of context in which to place them (*PL* VI.83, VI.358, VI.534). He also uses epic conventions like the focus on duels between heroic individuals. Milton's readers would have appreciated the use of such conventions, and would have understood the martial words that described the battle, but Adam could not have.

Furthermore, Raphael is not simply describing the war exactly as it occurred. Instead, he explicitly says that to allow "human sense" to understand a conflict of unearthly spirits, he will have to equate "spiritual to corporal forms as may express them best" (*PL* V.565, V.573-574). In other words, he consciously chooses every word he speaks about the events in Heaven, and he is theoretically striving to make them meaningful to Adam. In truth, however, the story is designed for Milton's contemporaries, and would be confusing to Adam.

Yet in the text of the poem, this inevitable confusion on the part of Adam does not occur. Unlike earlier, when he was innocent of death, he seems to have no trouble understanding the violent images of conflict that he is presented with here. On the one hand,

this is due to the necessity of using martial terms in order to describe a battle. However, the poem exploits this necessity to condense and confuse time for the reader. This is made clear by the fact that Book VI seems designed not to allow readers to gloss over the fact that Adam should be unable to comprehend the language he is hearing. It is sprinkled with lines that deliberately draw attention to the fact Raphael is using figurative language to try to help Adam imagine the war. For example, right before he describes Satan's and Michael's fight, Raphael questions the ability of the human imagination to understand what an angel says:

[W]ho though with the tongue
Of angels can relate or to what things
Likened on Earth conspicuous that may lift
Human imagination to such height
Of godlike pow'r. . . .

(*PL* VI.297-301)

Raphael questions this human ability right before he uses words that Adam cannot comprehend. Similarly, Raphael finishes his narration of the war by repeating that he is "measuring things in Heav'n by things on Earth, / At thy [Adam's] request," drawing attention to the fact that he is ostensibly telling this story to warn Adam about Satan in a way that Adam can understand, but is in fact "measuring" by things that do not yet exist on Earth (*PL* VI.894-895). In this way the poem encourages its readers to think constantly about this tension between the ostensible audience for this story, a man who cannot understand it, and the hidden but real audience, the poem's readers. While reading a story about the past, they are encouraged to think about how that past is experienced simultaneously in the present (by Adam), and in the future (by those reading about Adam's experiences).

While Milton manipulates and blurs time for various purposes throughout the poem, not just in Book VI, the context of this particular book strongly implies that the narrator works to raise the reader, through this manipulation of time, to a divine point of view. Even though the action of Book V was already established to have been taking place in Heaven, Book VI nevertheless begins by making the readers feel as though we are entering Heaven alongside Abdiel, as he returns to God after his debate with Satan. The book opens as Abdiel "unpursued / Through Heav'n's wide champaign held his way till Morn...with rosy hand / Unbarred the gates

of light" (*PL* VI.1-4). On a literal level, Abdiel is already in Heaven, and the fact that he travels until he meets "the gates of light" is merely a poetic way of saying that he travelled until dawn. However, the poet's choice of words invokes the image of golden gates opening to invite the reader into Heaven. This sense of movement into a divine sphere is enhanced by the very next image we receive: the home of the rising light, which both Abdiel and the reader are approaching, is revealed to be "Within the Mount of God fast by His throne" (*PL* VI.5).

This opening image of light also helps prepare us for the way that the poem will proceed to try to collapse time in order to approach eternity. The image of the rising morning that leads us to God's throne recalls the poet's invocation to light, followed with his depiction of God on His throne, at the beginning of Book III. In the Christian tradition that Milton wrote in, "light, divinity, and time" have well-established symbolic relationships that he manipulates to create in the invocation to light "a poetic conflation of...time and eternity" (Cirillo 55). The parallels of the beginnings of Book III and VI, therefore, not only highlight the way in which the later book uses intuitive reason to elaborate on the discursive argument presented in Book III, they also anticipate the way that the poet will manipulate time in his depiction of the War in Heaven.

Just as this section of the poem begins by taking us into a divine space, it ends with the poet leaving Heaven. The very first words that begin Book VII are a request from the poet to his muse to "Descend from Heav'n" (*PL* VII.1). Following her "voice divine," he has been led "Into the Heav'n of Heav'ns," but now he wishes to return to earth (*PL* VII.2,13). The simplest meaning of these lines is as a reference to the fact that the previous book and half have been set in Heaven, as Raphael has described events taking place there. However, these lines recall the invocation at the beginning of Book III, when Milton describes a similar change of place (from Hell to Heaven rather than from Heaven to Earth), but in doing so identifies with Satan's perspective, with his journey up from Hell. They thus imply a similar attempt by the poet to experience and portray a superhuman perspective. In this case, they enhance the sense that the perspective in Book VI is closer to God's than in other sections of the poem.

This identification of the poet's voice with a divine point of view is further developed with his remark that he has "drawn empyreal air" (*PL* VII.14).

As a guest in Heaven, he breathed in empyreal air—and thus, implicitly, expelled it with his voice as he sung of the events in Book VI. This conclusion is confirmed by his humble line later in the invocation that, "More safe I sing with mortal voice unchanged"—implying that he was earlier singing less safely with a voice that was not mortal (*PL* VII.24). In Book VI, the poet speaks with a divine voice.

It is also interesting to note the placement of this invocation that brings the narrator (and thus the reader) away from a divine perspective. While it marks the end of Book VI and Raphael's description of the War in Heaven, it is not placed at the end of Raphael's narration of divine history. In Book VII, he will go on to tell Adam the story of God's creation of the world. This choice emphasizes that the War in Heaven in particular, rather than Raphael's history as a whole, is being told from a divine point of view.

This distinction between the poet's adoption of a divine voice and Raphael's narration is important to the reader's experience of divine omnipresence. Angels, although closer to God than humans, are in the Great Chain of Being, exist in time and thus do not share in God's eternity. It is significant, therefore, that Book VI is not entirely told from an angelic perspective, even though Raphael is narrating it to Adam. Although at times Raphael talks about the battle as one who was participating, mentioning at one point the moment when "our eyes" confronted Satan's cannon for the first time, elsewhere he describes events he could not have been privy to, such as Satan's speech before the gathering of rebel angels (*PL* VI.571).⁵ At other times the narrator, who is ostensibly Raphael, distinguishes himself from both groups, as when, at the end of the first day of fighting, he refers to the two groups as "Michael and his angels" (rather than using "we angels," or some other signifier that would identify himself with the group) and "Satan with his rebellious" (*PL* VI.411, 414). The narrative voice thus cannot simply represent Raphael's perspective, but rather is, at least part of the time, an observer of the action with a more omnipresent perspective than a single angel, limited by time, could have.

⁵This insight into the fallen angels' actions is not evidence that "the point of view which we share...is that of the fallen angels," as Miller tries to argue (8). The reader, with a more inclusive, more omniscient point of view, is able to view both perspectives while being contained by neither.

As a rebel angel, cut off from God, Satan in Book VI has no such access to divine eternity. He cannot comprehend what omniscience entails, as he proves when he argues to his rebel host that since they have survived the first day of combat, God, who they “till now / Omniscient thought” is found to be “fallible it seems / Of future” (*PL* VI.429-430, 428-429). Since God must have sent out troops that he “judged / Sufficient to subdue us,” Satan reasons, his knowledge of the future, and thus his power, must be limited (*PL* VI.426-427). Satan can see divinity only as an expression of physical power in the immediate present, and thus he misinterprets both God and the events he experiences.

In his limited viewpoint, he represents the postlapsarian human view of time. Speaking to his troops, he declares that the first day of battle has proved that God cannot defeat them because they “have sustained one day in doubtful fight / (And if one day, why not eternal days?)” (*PL* VI.423-424). By extrapolating the outcome of one day to “eternal days,” he interprets eternity to be simply a linear expansion of time to infinity, because he is trapped in time. He falls into the trap of seeing God’s omniscience and omnipresence as mere prescience of the future, that must either determine what will happen or be flawed. This is the human perspective of time that the poem is trying to lift us above. By depicting Satan in this way, Book VI helps us observe our human point of view from a perspective similar to the divine eternity, to experience intuitively how the human habit of trying to infer eternal justice and reason based solely on our temporal experience is as flawed and ridiculous as Satan’s attempt to infer endless days from a single day.

Of course, this connection between Satan and humanity raises the question: since we are temporal creatures, how can we be raised up to something approaching a divine perspective if eternity cannot be inferred from time? Are we actually able to catch a distorted glimpse of omnipresence and divine reason by exalting our thoughts with intuitive logic, or are we, like Satan, unable to do more than create a false image of eternity cobbled together from our human experience of time? Ultimately, of course, this is an impossible question to answer; however, one of Milton’s peculiar beliefs included in this poem offers a potential resolution of this problem. Milton insisted, unusually for his time, in both *Paradise Lost* and in *De Doctrina Christiana* that time passes, and has always

passed, even before creation, in heaven (Welch 5). This assertion is problematic, as it seems to challenge God’s eternity, his place outside of time. Whatever Milton’s reasons for this belief, scholars looking at its effect on the poem have tended to accommodate it as matter of narrative expediency and look at how it helps create the poem’s overall sense of mythic time (Bedford 71).

However, this conception of time does not necessarily limit Milton’s God’s timelessness. The first mention of this concept in *Paradise Lost* is in another one of Raphael’s little asides, when he remarks that “(For time, though in eternity, applied / To motion measures all things durable / By present, past and future)” (*PL* V.580-582). That is, Raphael is saying that even actions that occur in pre-creation eternity can be discussed as sequential events. That said, this parenthetical comment takes on a more complex meaning when viewed in the context of the rest of the poem. Later on, Raphael refers again to time and motion before he tells of how God created the universe, declaring, “Immediate are the acts of God, more swift / Than time or motion but to human ears / Cannot without process of speech be told / (So told as earthly notion can receive)” (*PL* VII.176-179). Together, these passages imply that while time does exist in pre-creation eternity, Milton’s God, and the eternity that is one of his inherent characteristics, is still outside of and unbound by that time. God is “more swift” than “time or motion”—time may pass in Milton’s Heaven and before creation, but God is only portrayed as bound by such limits in order to make his actions intelligible to Adam and the readers.

So Milton’s God is outside of time, even though time can be applied within his eternity to describe motion—that is, anything that happens, including God’s actions. This paradox may help explain how temporally locked humanity can approach an omnipresent perspective. Because time can be applied in eternity to measure the created world, we have the ability with our human speech and ears to collapse time and use that experience to try to measure the events in the world as they appear to divine eternity. We cannot entirely escape time, but by expanding the reach of time into the pre-created world, and by allowing it to apply to God’s eternity, Milton increases the degree to which humankind can understand God’s perspective intuitively.

As Book VI of the poem raises the reader beyond human time and human reason into the intuitive realm of divine time and reason, it destabilizes the

human perceptions of the paradoxes of free will and foreknowledge, as well as of omnibenevolence and mortal suffering. Through the narrative techniques the poem employs and its compression and confusion of time, the poem works to bring the readers to the point when we will be able to resolve intuitively the paradoxes and see with a God's-eye-view how these conflicting concepts can exist in harmony.

Milton's God is presented to the reader, from the very first moment of his appearance in Book III, as encompassing all space and time. Although the poem has God declare the coexistence of foreknowledge and humanity's free will, the logical problems that this paradox creates make it difficult to embrace this forceful assertion. Likewise, the reader's own experience of human suffering, as well as the depiction in the poem of the suffering that Adam and his post-lapsarian descendants will undergo, makes God's justice, as declared both by the poet and his image of God, equally hard to accept. No matter how Milton tries to express God as a narrative figure, "his entrance remains in many ways hollow" (Fallon Samuel 46). It seems that he cannot be drawn down into the level of human reason, at least not in a way that a reader can connect with (Fallon Samuel 46). Since drawing God into mortal temporality is not sufficient on its own, the poem turns to bringing its human readers up into a more omnipresent, more divine, perspective than they normally have access to through Book VI; *Paradise Lost* attempts to induce an intuitive understanding of God's justice.

The opening of Book VI, as it prepares us to enter Heaven and a divine sense of eternity, also anticipates the transition between a flawed human perspective and a more divine view that is closer to the truth. After the transitional description of a traveling angel, the first thing presented by the narrator is the very concrete, material image of "a cave / Within the Mount of God fast by His throne" (*PL* VII.4-5).⁶ The poem presents its readers with not merely physical objects, but objects that carry with them a great deal of material mass, piled on top of each other: a cave, a mountain, and a throne. However, it then immediately contradicts that sense of weight by connecting these physical substances with an image of light living within them. Even the darkness that lives inside them is light, as Raphael reveals when he mentions that that "darkness there might well / Seem twilight here" (*PL* VI.11-12). The cave, mountain, and the throne, although they appear at first

view to be hefty and material, are actually infused with the immateriality of heaven. Similarly, when "Morn" is described a few lines below the Mount of God, the poem first presents a weighty picture of the dawn "arrayed in gold" (*PL* VI.12). This material image of metal is flipped immediately with the first word of the next line: it is "arrayed in gold / Empyreal" (*PL* VI.13-14). We are once again presented with a flawed, material perspective of the world only to have to poem shift us into a proper, more divine viewpoint.

One of the aims of this movement into a divine perspective is to demonstrate how God's foreknowledge, though all-encompassing, is consistent with the free will of the angels and of Adam and Eve. While the poem compresses time to display the past, present, and future all at once, leaving no question as to how events will unfold, it is also simultaneously imbued with a sense of choice and uncertainty. With the angels, this is primarily present in the existence of Abdiel. Although Satan and his followers are "to swift destruction doomed," Abdiel, as the one faithful angel, represents the path they could have taken (*PL* V.907). His presence in the poem opens up the possibility that the other angels could also have chosen not to fall. Without him, the War in Heaven would be between Satan's "train" and the angels who served around the Mount of God, the opposing sides seemingly predetermined (*PL* V.767). But Abdiel confuses the battle lines, for he was one of the as-yet-unfallen Satan's train—he is present at Satan's first counsel and Satan calls him "seditious" (*PL* VI.152). He thus clearly fights on the side of the loyal angels by choice, not by chance or necessity. This sense of choice on the part of Abdiel is emphasized by the suggestion, at the beginning of Book VI, that he could have fallen with his comrades. When God's loyal angels see Abdiel return, they respond by applauding and celebrating him, joyful "that one / That of so many myriads fall'n—yet one! / —Returned not lost" (*PL* VI.23-25). The implication, especially because of the excited interlude "—yet one!—," is that his continued loyalty was not a predetermined conclusion. If Abdiel could choose freely not to fall, then Satan and his followers could have so chosen as well, an assumption that Raphael confirms at the end of the book when he

⁶ Although I argue for a very different interpretation of Book VI than Miller does, I am indebted to his "Images of Matter" for introducing me to a discussion of materiality in Book VI.

warns Adam that, “Firm they might have stood / Yet fell” (*PL* VI.911-912).

Even more important than Abdiel for the argument that God gave humans the freedom to choose to fall, is the persistent presence of “ifs” in the epic.⁷ In several places, Raphael discusses the potential fate of men. When discussing the differences between human and angelic reason, he mentions that “Time *may* come when men / With angels *may* participate” (*PL* V.493-4; emphasis added). He adds, “*perhaps* / Your bodies *may* turn all to spirit” and that men “*may* at choice / Here or in Heav’nly paradises dwell-- / *If* ye be found obedient” (V.496-501; emphasis added). Though Raphael has already received the knowledge from God in Book III that Adam and Eve will not “be found obedient,” he still presents a picture of the future full of potential, where humanity might not fall into sin.

It is not merely visions of a joyful future that Raphael presents to Adam in such an open-ended way. At the end of his story of the War in Heaven, Raphael commands Adam to be wary of Satan, who is plotting to cause him to fall, “Which would be all his solace and revenge” (*PL* VI.905). This uncertain presentation is unavoidable from a narrative standpoint (Raphael cannot simultaneously warn Adam away from an action and tell him that taking such an action is inevitable), but coming as it does at the very end of this narrative arc, it works with the other moments of uncertainty to suggest the possibility of alternate futures.

This intrusive sense of potential alternatives to what both God and the reader know to be true also shows up in the poet’s carefully ambiguous word choice. At the end of his invocation to his muse at the beginning of Book VII, he reminds the reader of what has just transpired and says that Raphael told Adam about the War in Heaven “lest the like befall / In Paradise to Adam or his race” (*PL* VII.44-45). That “or” is fascinating, because from a historical and a narrative standpoint, its inclusion makes little sense. From a historical standpoint, as the narrator knows, Adam will fall. Nowhere else in the poem is there the suggestion that even if Adam did not fall, his descendants might have

⁷ Herman has a fascinating chapter on the extensive use of the explicit and implied “or” in the poem (although he focuses on different moments of possibility than I do), and how it creates a strong sense of uncertainty. However, he focuses on how this uncertainty relates to Milton’s life and the politics of the poem, whereas I examine these uncertainties for their place in establishing creaturely freedom.

fallen instead. From a narrative point of view, there no need to use “or” because both writer and readers know Adam will fall. Furthermore, this “or” comes as the poet himself is explaining that Raphael’s motivation was to warn Adam to keep himself “or his race” from falling—which makes no sense, because Raphael already knew that Adam would fall. The purpose of the choice of this particular word—especially when “and” could have fit the meter just as well—therefore appears to be another instance of adding confusion and uncertainty to what the reader knows to be true. It adds choice and possibility even amidst clear foreknowledge.

However, the most important “if” in this respect comes at the moment when Satan invents the cannon. “Someone intent on mischief...*might* devise / Like instrument,” Raphael says, but only “*if* malice should abound” [emphasis added] (*PL* VI.503-505, 502). In this aside, then, time is compressed so that the cannon is invented and used before it exists, but it does not have to exist. The cannon will be built, the cannon has been built, the cannon is being built—but only *if* men fall. After all, since Raphael is not able to describe the actual events of heaven, but only “lik’ning spiritual to corporal forms,” the cannon would not exist in the War in Heaven if it had not been invented on earth (*PL* V.573). The foreknowledge that both God and the reader have about the cannon’s existence, although certain, does not require that it must exist just because it will. Foreknowledge and free choice coexist.

These moments that imply different paths that history might have taken cannot merely be deceptive, a way of fooling Adam about his fate, because they exist for the reader as much as for Adam—and some of them exist only in the narration that is given to the reader, not to Adam. They do not suggest (except, perhaps, to Adam) that men really will not fall, as this is a surety from the very first line of the poem, when the poet demands his muse sing “Of man’s first disobedience” (*PL* I.1). But they are moments that inspire *an intuitive experience* of how events of the world depend not on time, not on when God knows things, but on choice. Adam will fall, Adam has fallen, Adam is falling. Adam will choose, Adam chose, Adam is choosing. Events are not predetermined by foreknowledge, nor is free choice limited, because God’s foreknowledge is unbound from time—and, in Book VI, so is ours.

The way that Raphael describes God’s actions during the War in Heaven, and God’s language in Book VI, demonstrate how Milton’s God relates to action and

choice through the medium of His foreknowledge. God does interfere in the battle, even before he sends the Son to cast out the rebel angels. Raphael relates that God “From His stronghold of Heav’n high overruled / And limited their might”—that is, the might of the two warring factions so that they cannot destroy Heaven with their power (*PL* VI.228-229). On the one hand, this is an acknowledgement of both God’s knowledge and his power to control events. He knows that the rebel angels would destroy Heaven, and his power is so great as to make both sides weaker. On the other hand, although God is over-ruling and limiting the battle, he is still detached from it—he is not controlling the actions and individuals or affecting their choices, merely mitigating the effects of those choices. In the same way, he does not cause the fall of Adam and Eve, but by offering humankind grace, and sending his Son to become Christ, he limits and alleviates its effects.

Of course, this harmonization of freedom and foreknowledge in Book VI does not address the other major paradox Milton needed to settle in order to justify the ways of God to men. The anguish and pain of human existence are hard for human reason to reconcile with an omnibenevolent Christian God. Post-lapsarian humans live in a “world / Of woe and sorrow” (*PL* VIII.337-338). Milton laments the suffering he himself has experienced—his imprisonment and blindness—in the invocation that begins Book VII, having “fall’n on evil days...In darkness and with dangers compassed round” (*PL* VII.26-27). By bringing his readers closer to comprehending God’s experience of creation, appealing to intuitive reason to alleviate the flaws in the human ability to comprehend God, the poet attempts to help them understand how, despite the presence of evil and pain, God’s “mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (*PL* III.134).

Book VI reconciles these paradoxes by showing how relatively transient, minor, and inconsequential our suffering is from a divine point of view, while acknowledging how horrific the evils of the world are to us. In particular, the battles of Book VI carry relatively little weight, especially compared with the debate between Satan and Abdiel at the end of Book V. The war seems to have no stakes and no real purpose. Its most important consequence, the fall of the rebel angels, was determined before the war even began. Satan and his host have already turned away from God in Book V, and are “to swift destruction doomed” (*PL* V.907). Their martial rebellion only confirms their

willful defiance and separation from God; it does not cause it.

Nor are there any lasting physical consequences of the battle. None of the angels can die, and they heal all their wounds relatively quickly. War causes the rebels to experience pain for the first time, and they suffer just as humans suffer. After he fights with Abdiel, “Satan first knew pain / And writhed him to and fro convolved, so sore” (*PL* VI.327-328). However, his suffering does not last, and “th’ ethereal substance closed, / Not long divisible” because “spirits...Cannot but by annihilating die / Nor in their liquid texture mortal wound / Receive no more than can the fluid air” (*PL* VI.330-331, 344-349). Just as the reader is first presented with a deceptively material image before receiving the truer, more divine perspective of the Mount of God at the beginning of the poem, Satan’s injury is first presented from the painful perspective of human experience before it is revealed to be relatively inconsequential and harmless.

Likewise, although the warring angels do a great deal of damage to Heaven’s topography over the course of their fight, this temporary chaos of war is undone almost instantly at the command of the Son near the end of the poem. The war first brings “foul disorder” to the heavenly landscape as it is strewn with broken armor and overturned chariots, and later causes the very hills of heaven to be uprooted and “Hurled to and fro with jaculation dire” (*PL* VI.288, 665). But this damage, an exaggeration of the damage that results from human wars, proves to be as temporary and deceptive as the injuries of the angels. Before the book is over, the Son speaks a command and “th’ uprooted hills retired / Each to his place...Heav’n his wonted face renewed / And with fresh flow’rets hill and valley smiled.” (*PL* VI.781-784). What initially appears to be the horrific effects of war proves to be easily fixed and no cause for concern.

This absence of any sense of stakes in, or consequences of, the battle is enhanced by the image of angels flinging hills back and forth, which the narrative presents not as a fearsome display of power but as ridiculous. Raphael informs his listener that the angels “plucked the seated hills with all their load...Uplifting bore them in their hands” and that “hills amid the air encountered hills” (*PL* VI.644-646, 664). The choice of words like “plucked” and the description of flying hills filling the air, without any sense of harm, makes the angels less like mighty Titans than like Saturday-

morning cartoon characters dropping anvils on each other's heads.

This almost farcical impression comes to a climax with the way Satan and Belial toss puns back and forth as they use the cannons against the faithful angels. While elsewhere in the poem Milton uses puns to make serious points, the sheer density of them in these passages turns the solemn battle into a comedy routine.⁸ For example, Satan pretends to be proposing peaceful negotiation while actually commanding that the cannons be fired by asking his angels to “briefly touch what we propound – and loud,” making three puns with only seven words (*PL* VI.566-567) (Teskey VI.559-67n.). Even then, these passages could be read as a horrifying Satanic mockery of the suffering of his enemies, except that, once again, there are no long-term consequences, no lives lost or damage done by the cannons. They turn the War in Heaven into a joke.

If heavenly battle proves farcical, earthly war becomes a game. Raphael remarks during his narration of the battle, “War seemed a civil game / To this uproar” (*PL* VI.667). Explicitly, he says only that the heavenly war is so terrible that battles on earth pale in comparison, not that human war actually is like a game—except that in the moment it takes our eyes to pass over the enjambment between “game” and “To this,” he is saying exactly that. Like a game, the War in Heaven is comical and without real consequences. And earthly war, in turn, seems like “a civil game” compared even to that farcical conflict. While expressly acknowledging the horrors of war, this line also implies it should not be taken seriously in the grand scheme of things.

And this, perhaps, is why Milton's God does not seem to take it seriously. From a perspective that reads the war as consequential and intentionally serious, God's reaction to it seems rather cold and distant, even tyrannical. Although he has the strength to limit the might of the armies as he pleases, he makes no attempt to simply stop it. He knows both that the battle will solve nothing and that the Son can end the war whenever he chooses, but he allows it to drag on for three heavenly days. If war is as horrific and as full of suffering as it appears from a human perspective, these do not seem to be the decisions of a just and empathetic god.

However, from the perspective of an omnipresent, omniscient God, a perspective that *Paradise Lost* is inviting us to try and share, the ornate distance of these passages is appropriate to the actual effects of the war. From the point of view of eternity, the battle is a harmless game, not worth his interference beyond limiting its effects to make sure it stays harmless. Furthermore, although he did not cause the war, he knows that he can use it to “great purpose,” to honor his Son and “declare All power on Him transferred” (*PL* VI.671-678). He takes a misfortune, war, and twists it into something purposeful and fortunate. From the divine perspective of Milton's God, he interferes just enough to limit suffering and to ensure that a greater good will come of it.

Together, the lack of physical consequences in the battle, the almost-farcical impression of the war, and weirdly distant tone of God's reaction give a strangely hopeful representation of human suffering. Just as Satan misinterprets the fact that the rebellious angels were not instantly overpowered to mean that God must not be omniscient, humans misinterpret our immediate experience because we are not omniscient. From God's perspective, Book VI seems to be implying, human battles are unimportant, not because God is not benevolent, but because human suffering, no matter how horrific it seems at the time it occurs, is relatively transitory and minor. After all, the only real consequence of the War in Heaven is that the rebel angels are thrown into Hell, without chance of redemption. No matter how much misery post-lapsarian humans might endure, they can be, by God's grace, redeemed. From an omnipresent perspective like the one into which the reader is lifted in Book VI, the evils humans experience are as temporary as the wounds of the angels in the face of God's grace. In this way, the poem attempts to reconcile the paradox of evil and benevolence, and justify God's ways to suffering men.

Milton's ultimate success in this venture to induce a genuinely inspired insight that brings his readers closer to understanding God's justice lies in the fact that in order to produce this insight, he is trying to induce it artificially, bringing its status as a genuinely inspired insight into question. This is particularly significant because the insight in this situation, for him, should be divinely inspired, but instead it is Milton-inspired. He is trying to get human logic to understand divine reason, to lift up human understanding so that it can understand divine eternity, to make human

⁸ Miller finds the puns such an “offensive” violation of “poetic decorum” that he declares that the rebel angels' speeches in these passages constitute “an abuse” of language (10).

reason explain what only divine understanding can encompass. This attempt is made problematic not only by the question of how post-lapsarian humans can use right reason to approach God, as mentioned earlier, but by the paradox of trying to make human reason become more divine through the force of external human logic. Milton's fear of overstepping his boundaries, of questioning the source of his own inspiration, is already strongly present in the poem, and this substitution of himself and his poem for direct divine inspiration feeds into that concern even more. These issues are never resolved in the poem, but the very last lines of the poem might indicate a way that Milton was addressing them: Adam and Eve "hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow / Through Eden took their solitary way" (*PL* XII.648-649). The interesting contradiction of "hand in hand" and "solitary" might point to Milton's recognition of the problem of how he was trying to guide his readers into individual and genuine insight. Milton hopes to lead his readers, hand in hand, as fellow post-lapsarian humans towards a closer understanding of what he believes to be God's reason and justice, but ultimately, each reader must come to his or her own individual understanding.

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