

**Danielle A. St. Hilaire. *Satan's Poetry: Fallenness and Poetic Tradition in Paradise Lost*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 2012. x + 246pp. ISBN 13: 9780820704562. \$58.00 (cloth).**

NEIL FORSYTH

The late and much regretted Martin Evans wrote in his contribution to Stephen Dobranski's *Milton in Context* that interest in Milton's Satan had waned in recent years and that it seemed the last word had perhaps been written on the topic. This exciting new book, filled as it is with fertile ideas, suggests that there was in fact a good deal more to say. I am not always in agreement with those ideas, as I shall argue here, but the book is always splendidly challenging. The title *Satan's Poetry* does not refer to Satan's rhetoric nor indeed to any of the unforgettable passages that stick in everyone's memory. Rather it announces that language is fallen, the result of Satan's initiative in heaven, and that what is at stake in the poem is the redemption of the fallen individual through that fallen language.

Quite how this is supposed to happen, not surprisingly, never becomes clear, and the generally high standard of the book's style lapses in the final section as it tries to explain its idea of redemption. Thus Eve, we are told, "carries this redemption only by pointing beyond herself; salvation is present in her as an absence, which is to say that it is present only negatively" (205). Adorno's notion of the negativity of the artwork is responsible for this glorious mud, and we are made to suffer some choice citations about how artworks exist to signal "the possibility of the nonexisting" (206). Apparently it is the reader of the poem who is to be redeemed. Certainly not Satan (Origen's doctrine of apocatastasis is not mentioned) though he is responsible for the fallen language which is supposed to redeem us.

The bold title means that the act of writing poetry, heroic poetry in particular, is a fallen activity. Epic poetry begins in hell, as the poem tells us at 2.547-50, when the fallen angels sing their own heroic deeds. But that is not what this book means by "Satan's poetry," and indeed that famous passage is mentioned only as an instance of the distance between divine and fallen language, since "their Song was partial." Rather the title means that Satan made possible the independent creative powers of the poet. Without Satan's fall, heaven would simply have gone on repeating itself and imitating or praising God. Nothing creative could have happened that in any way differentiated itself from God's initial creation. Yet this apparently does not mean that the poem necessarily deviates from its stated purpose, to justify the ways of God to man. Rather it means acknowledging how language changes with the Fall. Adam and Eve sing "unmediated" hymns before the Fall, but afterwards the prayer of repentance in Book 10 must be planned and then repeated by the narrator. We can register the distance between intent and deed even though the almost exact repetition means "Adam and Eve have managed to bring their intent back in line with their words" (10). The cause of the change is Satan. If so, then how can Eve repeat her love song, but in the negative mode ("neither breath of morn . . . without thee is sweet"), well before the Fall (4. 641-55)? The contrast does not work.

The narrative voice of the poem aligns itself constantly with Satan, "employing similar rhetorical maneuvers to construct itself as a fallen individual" in a fallen world (16). Here the author might have made use of Hugh Richmond's fine analysis of the deliberate nature of the parallels between Satan and narrator, but she ignores him.

Instead the argument is even larger, that “we are all of the devil’s party, like it or not” (16). Against Regina Schwartz’s view that Satanic creation is merely repetition compulsion, or Stanley Fish’s argument that it is all illusion, St. Hilaire insists that it is always self-creation, but that is the basis of everything else now available to human beings. Even if Satan admits that God did in fact create him (as he does on Mt. Niphates), still what counts is that “the creature has the ability to re-create himself in a different image.”

This vital step in the argument is based partly on Harold Bloom, as St. Hilaire admits (21), but more on Hegel. The “becoming of the subject is itself a creative act” (19). It may be negative, but no less real for that. It is always “a reaction against the creation that already exists,” and this in turn means that the new self takes on a special identity, it is “a particular” and no longer simply part of the generality that was God’s creation.

The book pursues this point of view through rewarding close analysis of various passages. Occasional infelicities like “sought to sort out” (53) serve only to point up how well-written the book is. It includes analysis of the way Adam bewails his loss of connection with God at 9.1080–84, and then likens himself to Satan in Book 10. But we begin with an elaborate analysis of what Satan means by asserting he is “self-begot, self-raised.” This is linked to the line at 5.680 in which Satan says, in Gordon Teskey’s punctuation “New laws from Him who reigns new minds may raise / In us who serve”—characteristically ambiguous syntax.

Various related passages all show a real soul-searching on Satan’s part, especially the various questions, not simply rhetorical, that he asks Beelzebub, and then himself. “Hadst thou the same free Will and Power to stand?” (4.66). St. Hilaire takes these questions seriously as a way to think through his situation and discover what possibilities of action remain. God also asks questions, of course, though he knows the answer in advance: “What pleasure I from such obedience paid . . .?” (3.107). The effect of such questions on the reader, however, may well not be predetermined. The William Empson evoked occasionally and sympathetically by St. Hilaire might well have replied that history unfortunately knows many who take pleasure in the obedience of others. For Milton’s God, however, “these questions are neither in earnest, nor are they even rhetorical” (29). The contrast is stark with Satan, who asks questions because he does not know, and eventually this must be the position of the reader, and the poet. It was all very well for Adam to answer a similar question about his origin by going beyond himself to assume “some great Maker” (8.278), but Satan refuses that intuition and so allows his self to come to be, out of “his epistemological emptiness” (34). He remakes himself as deficiency.

This makes him not what William Kerrigan or others define as a “negative creator”: rather he becomes, in the image of darkness visible, a being that the poem does indeed show to have real substance, “a negativity with existence, a tangible nothingness.” St. Hilaire pursues these bold paradoxes through several pages of splendid close reading of the relevant passages. It is hard going at times, but the payoff is usually worth the labor. As in Adorno’s aesthetic theory, definitely pertinent now, Satan like the artwork is “a positive manifestation of negativity,” and this in fact constitutes the conditions of possibility of the poem itself. And the reason for this is precisely the whole story that the poem takes upon itself to tell.

This includes the seduction of Eve. There is a small oddity here in that “seduce” surely has only an apparent and no etymological connection with a word that might mean “lead oneself” (although the latest *OED* wavers). But the idea that Satan allows

Eve to lead herself rather than to follow God's sole command is excellent and well argued. It includes a brief focus on the linguistic ambiguity in that notorious line "Your fear itself of Death removes the fear" (9.702). The book returns to this point later, and makes rather heavy weather of the discussion in cumbersome Hegelian terms about generality and particularity, aligning the Satanic self and Eve's own newly discovered sense of possibility. Even here though St. Hilaire's instinctive sense of style saves her from staying turgid for long, and several well-turned points emerge: "Satan tells Eve to eat because it will make her godlike in her knowledge, whereas Eve questions why she should not eat because she does not have any knowledge that would prevent her from doing so" (128).

The discussion of the Satanic self leads us into the narrator's fallen self, and thence, by an important move, to the argument that the narrator (or Milton, it is not always clear) constructs the poem by negating or differentiating himself from his predecessors in the epic tradition. This is where the book's argument really takes off, but also where it risks coming apart. The connection between Satanic aspiration and the narrator's own activity is made quite brilliantly through the word "Mount." Satan builds "a Mount/ Raised on a Mount" in order to show he has surpassed God's original. St. Hilaire links Satan's building of this mount to the narrator's desire "to soar / Above the Aeonian Mount." But in her enthusiasm she gets carried further than her argument allows. The poem does not "insistently repeat its claim that it is 'above'" all other poems: it says something like that only twice, once in the first invocation, once again in "above the Olympian Hill" at 7.3. Otherwise, that grandiose claim is tempered by the very modesty of the celestial patroness topos itself ("If answerable style I can obtain" [9.20]; my italics).

The Renaissance practice of *imitatio*, as discussed by Thomas Greene or G. W. Pigman, is the key concept here. Linking it to Satan, St. Hilaire suggests that he objects to God's copy, the Son, being made his superior since Satan believes in the equality of representations within the figure of allusion or *aemulatio*. There is some confusion here between emulation and surpassing, as St. Hilaire allows, and that indeed would be fuel to Satan's own ambiguous assertions of equality with the Son. What he really wants to do is to assert his own difference, which quickly comes to feel like superiority.

The topic of allusion, so central to *imitatio*, is cleverly introduced. Satan's repetition of God's language in the "Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers" speeches, may be read as an internal allusion which asserts its difference from the original even as it exploits: that Satanic "if" is what makes the point, since he continues "If these magnificent Titles yet remain / Not merely titular" (5.773-74). And in the rest of the speech, we are shown Satan thinking as he goes along, breaking the unified structure of the divine form of address. What Satan does here is what Milton himself does to previous epics. The allusion to Ariosto (whether it is ironic or playful or deliberately paradoxical) in the claim to sing of "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" is the foundational moment for Milton's poem because it too is a revolt: *Paradise Lost* creates its own out of the space that other poems do not occupy.

St. Hilaire tries to argue the same is true for all literary allusion, but this leads us very far afield. Bloom's antagonistic model of influence is once again the key predecessor, followed closely by Richard DuRocher and Gordon Teskey (once a teacher of St. Hilaire), though St. Hilaire is quietly ironic about this military image of literary history. Yet the equation of Satan's self-creation with the narrator's seems to carry a similar implication, and indeed Satan does after all immediately declare war.

Here is where the book's argument risks coming undone. St. Hilaire explores what has been called the bleeding tree topos at the moment of Eve's fall (Virgil, Ovid, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser). Perhaps this exploration, thorough and interesting as it is, does indeed show how the peculiarity of *Paradise Lost* can be measured by comparing with other, some even perhaps source, epic trees with wounds. But in Milton, after all, it is not the typically pastoral idea of the defaced tree that dominates: rather it is earth, or all nature, which feels the wound—and does not bleed. And unfortunately, except in the largest sense in which all allusion asserts difference, the discussion cannot really be shown to have much to do with Satan.

One effort to argue that it does leads to a strange assertion. Eve certainly repeats Satan's words as she thinks things through for herself beside the tree, but Adam, who indeed never meets Satan, can hardly be said to be "bound to Satan through Eve" (134). Surely there is no real parallel between Satan's words to Beelzebub, "If thou beest he, but o how fall'n! how chang'd" (1.84) and Adam's to Eve, "How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost" (9.900). On that slim basis Adam can hardly be said to have an unconscious bond with Satan.

A long central chapter explores from a more theoretical point of view what Milton's poem can tell us about how literary tradition works. Eliot, Gadamer, Hegel in particular, Adorno, Kristeva, Derrida are all called to witness, often against themselves. Eliot's "ideal order," for example, exists only in heaven, for St. Hilaire. Her idea of tradition, following the Satanic stimulus, is as of something much more broken, damaged, almost incapable of being cured. It is singular and particular, in Hegel's term, or in Adorno's "the language of suffering." She does mention the etymology of "tradition" as being from Latin "trado," but her sense of its ambivalence might have been enhanced if she had realized that "treason" also comes from the same Latin root, though via medieval French.

One of the satisfying aspects of reading this book is that some of the best points return from time to time but dressed in richer clothes. The originals in epic tradition of "my advent'rous song" lead us to the point that the higher argument is sufficient by itself to raise that name, and this in turn to a question about whether "raise" can also be intransitive, and thus that the argument itself can create the poem as an epic, indeed that the poem is, momentarily perhaps, its own agent. I do not think that is so, but the thought is worth having, however momentarily and however excessive it is. The poem has no need of Moses's muse, even defies her (?), not only because it exceeds the biblical narrative, but because it licenses itself to do so, putting Adam in a different part of the garden at the crucial moment. Thus the muse is no longer addressed or invoked in Book 9, merely mentioned in the third person as one who will continue her nightly visitations.

The final chapter discusses the various muses and inspiration once again, showing at some length how Homer and Hesiod differ, and both from Virgil, Ovid, Spenser, etc., in this respect. These distinctions are always interesting to revisit, but there needs to be a new argument to justify the call, and here the point seems to be simply to undermine the whole convention. St. Hilaire makes the very odd assertion, for example, borrowing from William Porter, that the shepherd who first taught the chosen seed could be Hesiod as well as Moses. Now Hesiod does indeed present himself as a potentially inspired shepherd, and there are many shepherds in the tradition, but surely none of them apart from Moses's muse may be said to have taught the chosen seed. The long discussion of Hesiod's muses is thus beside the point. Far too much is made of the deictic "that shepherd."

The reason St. Hilaire makes this specious point is that she wants definitively to dissociate the poem's language from divine inspiration, in spite of what it manifestly asks for, and link it back to what she thinks of as its Satanic origins. I do not think, once again, that the word "fallen" in the narrator's self-presentation, "fall'n on evil days," nor even its repetition, "On evil days though fall'n" (7.25–26), is enough to tie the narrator into that Satanic world. Rather, the point of the echoes, if they have one only, is surely to liberate the narrator and to assert his difference: both Satan and he are fallen, sure enough, but only Milton has a "mortal voice" to contrast with those "evil tongues." The narrator risks talking only to himself, but the confirmed solipsist, as we see in his return to hell and to his adoring troops, is Satan. That is also the point of the story of the birth of Sin, splendidly discussed here and with a cunning effort to marry it with the origin of Satan in Book 5. Thus the conclusion of St. Hilaire's discussion of the narrator's inadequacy is not dispiriting. Alienate from God the narrator may well be, but he is close to Satan, who is the *fons et origo* of poetry itself. It took a great poem like *Paradise Lost* to make us feel the effects of that source, and see what it implies. I remain unsure what that is, and whether it really can be that I as a close reader of both Milton and St. Hilaire am somehow redeemed. It would be nice to think so.

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Given the obvious biblical themes of his most important poetry, from the early Nativity Ode to the masterpieces, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, it might strike readers that a new edition of Milton's twelve-book epic describing itself as "biblically annotated" would be both obvious and redundant. Yet Matthew Stallard makes a compelling case for what he describes as the "marginalization" of the Bible in the annotations of most modern scholarly editions of the poem. Such marginalization is not a function of ignorance of—willful or otherwise—or even hostility to the Bible, but the result of the efforts by most editors to be as inclusive as possible in their glossing of Milton's likely sources and analogues. When the Bible has to share time and page space with Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Tasso, Ariosto, and so on, there are only so many times an editor can include a note pointing readers to a biblical passage. The advantage of an edition like Stallard's, which limits its annotations exclusively to the Bible, is that it can afford to be far more exhaustive and detailed.

Stallard's volume also departs from other modern editions of the poem with respect to the particular Bible it cites. Most previous scholars have relied on Harris Fletcher's assertion that the King James Version was Milton's English Bible of choice (in his prose, but also in his poetry), using it as the means for recognizing the poet's citations of biblical passages in both his poetry and his prose. Stallard wants to bring other early modern English Bibles into the conversation, including the 1539 Great