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## ***The Mysterious Darkness of Unknowing***

### *Paradise Lost* and the God Beyond Names

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In 1667, John Milton dropped a bomb on the literary and intellectual world of England. Unfortunately, that bomb proved initially to be a dud, an object of curiosity rather than an immediate literary sensation. Received with more of a collective raised eyebrow than with the buzz and stir for which Milton must have hoped, the ten-book edition of *Paradise Lost* proved to be a difficult sale, and goes nearly completely unread today.<sup>1</sup> Published without any of the editorial apparatus modern readers take for granted, the first edition of *Paradise Lost* was also published without the "arguments" or miniature plot summaries that have become so familiar to readers of later editions (including the now dominant twelve-book version of 1674). In effect, the first printing of *Paradise Lost* was loosed upon a world that was not yet ready for it, in a form that it could not—and did not—fully digest.<sup>2</sup> Though the 1667 *Paradise Lost* does all the same work that the 1674 version does, perhaps the audience it sought, though "fit," was far too "few" for the work to have sufficient impact or to provide its author with a legacy that the world would not willingly let die.

So why read, much less write about, the 1667 *Paradise Lost* today? Much can be written about the difference in form between the 1667, ten-book edition, and the more famous 1674, twelve-book edition. Choosing the ten-book format, rather than the twelve-book format

is, as Barbara Lewalski argues, "an overt political statement . . . [as] Milton eschewed Virgil's twelve-book epic format with its Roman imperialist and royalist associations for the ten-book model of the republican Lucan."<sup>3</sup> Even more politically suggestive, however, is the timing of the poem's publication, coming after the plague of 1665 and the devastating fires of September 1666, and after the conclusion reached by many that the disasters were the judgment of God upon a debauched and dissolute nation.<sup>4</sup> Robert Elborough provides an excellent example of this way of thinking in his 1666 sermon, entitled "London's Calamity by Fire":

What is it that God saith to others by *Londons conflagration*? Oh have a care of *Londons abomination*. If you partake of *London*, as to its *sinning*, you shall partake of *London* as to its *suffering*. . . . alas, who will not acknowledge that God hath dealt severely with *London*? . . . God comes with the *Plague* and that don't work; God comes with the *Sword*; & that don't work; at last he comes with a *Fiery judgment*, that so he may not come with this, *London adieu*, and *England Farewel*, thy house is left desolate unto thee, and thou are left desolate without an house.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Vincent, a Nonconformist minister who is one of our most vivid sources of descriptive detail about London during the 1665 plague, argues in *Gods Terrible Voice in the City* (first printed in 1666) that both the plague and the fire were sent as judgments from God: "The Plague is a terrible Judgment by which God speaks unto men," and "God spake terribly by fire when London was in flames."<sup>6</sup> Like Elborough, Vincent is not at all shy about assigning blame for the disasters; in fact, he offers a list of 25 sins prevalent in London that caused God's anger. Among the highlights are the eleventh sin, "*fullness of Bread, or intemperance in eating*"; the fifteenth sin, "*Drunkennesse*," and the twenty-first sin, "*Prodigality and profuse spending*."<sup>7</sup> But more than these sins, for Vincent it seems to have been the various provisions of the Clarendon Code (specifically, the Act of Uniformity of 1662, and the Five-Mile Act of 1665) that angered God to the point that he sent plague and fire as punishments:

Here I might speak of the Judgment executed, August 24th 1662, when so many Ministers were put out of their places, and the judgments

executed, March 24, 1665, when so many Ministers were banished five miles from Corporations. . . . Gospel-Ordinances, and Gospel-Ministers were the safeguard of London, the glory and defence. But when the Ordinances were slighted, and the Ministers were mocked . . . God is provoked.<sup>8</sup>

Barbara Lewalski quotes a letter of the same period (dated September 1666) that questions the prevailing mindset by seizing on the fact that various groups in England offer widely disparate—and self-serving—explanations for the back-to-back disasters:

"All see the same desolation, yet, by looking on it with different opinions and interest, they make different constructions as if the object were so. Some thinking it a natural and bare accident, while others imagine it a judgment of God. . . . The Quakers say, it is for their persecution. The Fanaticks say, it is for the banishing and silencing their ministers. Others say, it is for the murder of the king and the rebellion of the city. The Clergy lay the blame on schism and licentiousness, while the Sectaries lay it on imposition and their pride."<sup>9</sup>

Each of these explanations, with the exception of the "natural and bare accident" theory, involves a different notion of the active judgment of God. In turn, each of the "judgment of God" theories involves a construction of the deity that is different from every other theory. For example, the Quaker theory constructs a God who devastates London as punishment for the persecution of Quakers, while "Fanaticks" (such as Vincent) construct a God who is angry over the treatment of non-Anglican ministers, and unnamed royalist "Others" construct a God who lays waste to the city as delayed retribution for the execution of Charles I. Each complaining group creates a God in its own image, a God that is especially sympathetic to the group's grievances. Against this background, the constructions of God in *Paradise Lost* demand attention, especially because the poem was first published in a setting where urban disasters were commonly read as the judgment of God, and in which the constructions of God varied as widely as did the "sins" being "judged."

Why read the 1667 edition, then? The answer, for me, is a simple one: because of its context, 1667 calls for a different and perhaps more intensely focused kind of reading than does 1674. What a

consideration of the 1667 edition allows us to do, even demands that we do, is to read this work as a reflection of the prevalent contemporary tendency to imagine God as one's own partisan (a view of God that Milton had once shared), and to read without reference to Milton's later poetic works.<sup>10</sup> What such a reading brings to the forefront is that the epic—in *its earliest published* form—rejects partisan notions of God, including (but not limited to) those commonly expressed in the wake of London's disastrous mid-1660s. Despite its frequent use of human imagery to facilitate poetic descriptions of the Father and Son characters presented as alternate models of deity, *Paradise Lost* often expresses nervousness, doubt, and hesitancy about such imagery. Positive (in the sense of *posited*) images of deity are cross-examined, countered, and finally negated. *Paradise Lost* presents both positive images of deity and negations of those images, negations ultimately informed by an apophatic or negative theology. When reading the 1674 edition, placed in the context of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, the strain of negative or apophatic theology in *Paradise Lost* can be more easily brought into focus as each of those works presents an image of a deity that radically differs from the other and from those presented in the epic. But a close reading of several passages will show that it is readily discernible in the 1667 edition, even without the context that the later poems provide.

### *The God Beyond Names: Negative Theology*

At its most fundamental level, negative theology suggests—much like its modern relative, deconstruction—that there is a fundamental gap between our language and those subjects and objects our language attempts to describe.<sup>11</sup> For the negative theologian, the ultimate subject / object of language is "God." But what *is* God? Can this "God" be described at all, much less in ontological terms, terms of being, or is-ness? For the negative theologian, the answer to this last question is "yes, but no," while the answer to the first question is "I do not (or cannot) know."

Negative theology is actually something of a misnomer. The Greek term *apophatic* is more to the point. Meaning "without voice" or "unsayable," apophatic theology is an attempt to highlight the

limits of human reason, imagination, and discourse in any consideration or meditation upon the divine. Apophatic theology is a way of speaking—without speaking—about that which cannot accurately be spoken. It is a dismantling of images, a denial of concepts, and a negation of the qualities that are posited to the divine in *cataphatic* ("with voice" or "sayable") or positive theology. However, negative theology is a complement to, not the enemy of, positive theology, serving to remind us of our limits and to prevent us from concretizing our images and metaphors, thus serving the believer as an aid in the attempt to avoid idolatry. The relation between positive and negative theologies is one of the central dynamics of Western theology—a tension between the God with qualities and the God without qualities. This tension, most famously presented in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, can be described as a continuous process of affirmation and negation, a "yes, but no" approach to trying to understand that which, ultimately, is beyond human understanding. The "yes, but no" pattern posits and then negates qualities (goodness, being, righteousness, and the like) that might be used to understand the divine.

Pseudo-Dionysius, in his works the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology*,<sup>12</sup> establishes the essential pattern of affirmation and negation. Starting with "the most important name, 'Good' (*DN* 68), Dionysius argues closely for an understanding of the divine that emerges from "the processions of God" (*DN* 68). Each of these "processions" (Good, Being, Wisdom, Truth, and so on) is best understood in causal terms, that is, in terms of God as the cause of Goodness, Being, Wisdom, and Truth as they manifest in creatures and the created world. It is an inductive approach to the divine, reasoning from the manifestation to the cause thereof, from the observable instance to the unobserved (and unobservable) principle or cause. These "processions of God," then, are the observable effects of the divine as translated into human terms; much like Milton's "wayes of God to men," these processions are the conceivable and categorizable "aspects" and "actions" by which human beings are able to represent God to themselves in the world.

The language of "processions" here is from Proclus, the fifth century Neoplatonist whose *Elements of Theology* is frequently echoed by Dionysius (and is thus one of the major proofs for the pseudonymous

nature of the Dionysian texts).<sup>13</sup> For Proclus, procession (πρόοδος—going forth), is the method through which all things are brought into existence, and the basis for how the ineffable may be apprehended, if not actually known. Qualities may be affirmed about the divine—in a strictly limited way—through observing the characteristics of creatures and the created realm. This indirect, or affirmative, method allows for a partial apprehension of the divine, based on extrapolation: "differences within a participant order are determined by the distinctive properties of the principles participated . . . ; to each cause is attached, and from each proceeds, that effect which is akin to it."<sup>14</sup> The idea is that each creature (what Proclus calls an existent [ὄντα—that which exists]) participates in (from μετέχο; share in, partake of) the level of existence above it, sharing in the qualities of that higher level, and this chain continues all the way up until it is broken at the point of the One (τοῦ; the highest divine, especially as conceived in the third century A.D. by Plotinus), or what Proclus calls "the unparticipated."<sup>15</sup> This unavailability is precisely why, according to Dionysius, the affirmative method can only ever take the worshipper a limited distance: "we have a habit of seizing upon what is actually beyond us, clinging to the familiar categories of our sense perceptions, and then we measure the divine by our human standards and, of course, are led astray by the apparent meaning we give to the divine and unspeakable reason" (*DN* 106). The words we use about God only point to that which cannot be truly spoken, cannot be captured, summed up, or defined in human terms. The "words we use about God. . . must not be given the human sense" (*DN* 106).

The words we use about God, in fact, must be withdrawn almost as soon as they are uttered. No name, no quality, and no combination—even infinite combinations—of names and qualities can do any more, ultimately, than point to our own inability to describe and understand the divine:

we use the names Trinity and Unity for that which is in fact beyond every name, calling it the transcendent being above every being. But no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being. (*DN* 129)

And so negation, or apophatic theology is required—not merely as a correction to, but in a fuller sense as a complement to, the affirmations of more traditional cataphatic or positive theology. As Oliver Davies and Denys Turner point out,

The interdependence of the Mystical Theology and the Divine Names shows the dialectical pulsation between affirmations and negations that characterises the enterprise of Christian negative theology as whole. Here negation is not free-standing, but secures the theological character of the affirmative speech patterns in address to God or speech about God. . . . a movement of negation, as "forgetting", is held in tension with a movement of affirmation . . . and each informs the other.<sup>16</sup>

Nicholas of Cusa, the fifteenth century German theologian, emphasized this interdependence by arguing that negative theology serves as the only safeguard against idolatry: "the theology of negation is so necessary to the theology of affirmation that without it God would be worshipped not as the infinite God but as creature; and such worship is idolatry, for it gives to an image that which belongs only to truth itself."<sup>17</sup>

The complementary nature of the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic—positive and negative—theologies is one of procession and return, a descent from, and ascent to, the divine. As Michael Lieb notes, "Pseudo-Dionysius maintains that [cataphatic theology] embodies a descent from first things to last, that is, from the most abstruse conceptions of deity to their concretization in symbolic form," while its necessary complement, apophatic theology, "involves a return or *epistrophē* upward from last to first things. In this return we discover an obliteration of knowing, understanding, naming, speech, and language as the seer travels into the realm of unknowing, divine ignorance, the nameless, the speechless, and the silent."<sup>18</sup>

When positive and negative theologies are held in a complementary tension, they can be seen as an ongoing attempt to make our theological reach exceed our linguistic grasp. We form images and concepts of the divine in part because that is how we make sense of our experience of the physical world. But these images and concepts are merely symbols, which must remain provisional, fluid, and flexible in order to serve effectively the purpose of bringing humans into

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relation with the divine. Once these symbols begin to be concretized, once the image or concept begins to be mistaken for that to which it merely points, negation is necessary in order to clear the way again. For Jean-Luc Marion, this difference between the rigid and fluid, the opaque and the transparent, is the signal distinction between "the idol" and "the icon." The idol "expresses a concept of what it then names 'God,'" which process renders the divine (or the *invisible*—Marion's term for that which cannot be aimed at or taken into view) "disqualified and abandoned." The icon, on the other hand, seeks "to allow that the visible not cease to refer to an other than itself."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the idol serves to focus attention to and on itself, while the icon seeks to focus attention beyond itself. The idol is concrete and opaque. The icon is transparent to transcendence. The icons of positive theology remain effective only so long and only so far as they remain transparent to transcendence. Once this transparency begins to cloud, and the icon begins to be regarded as pointing to itself rather than "to an other than itself," the icon has become an idol. Idolatry, or what Marion calls "the idolatrous gaze," arises out of "a sort of essential fatigue," a fatigue that grows out of the strain of worshipping that which cannot truly be contained in human images or concepts. "The gaze settles only inasmuch as it rests—from the weight of upholding the sight of an aim without term, rest, or end." The further "the gaze" pursues this "aim without term, rest, or end," the greater grows the temptation to harden icons into idols, to concretize symbols, to "rest" within "the scope of [what] particular human eyes [or understandings] can support."<sup>20</sup>

Positive theology starts out as an aid to focus beyond the visible, the constrainable, and the definable, but inevitably—as the limits of human sight, understanding, and imagination are reached—it becomes a trap, a prison whose walls are the very images that once served as aids, but now have become impediments. Negation is what can remove these impediments, and can remind us that our images and our concepts are not identical to that to which they merely point. Negation reminds us of our limits. In Dionysius's words, "the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming" (*MT* 139); thus, it is imperative to remember that the divine is "beyond intellect" and that as we



approach it "we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing" (MT 139). From this point of view, what we say about "God" says little or nothing about the divine itself, but it says a great deal about us, our world, our concepts and categories. The divine as it actually *is*, is "beyond every assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it" (MT 141).

Dionysian ideas were, of course, available to Milton and to his contemporaries (an English translation of the *Mystical Theology* was published in 1653);<sup>21</sup> though due, at least in part, to the controversy surrounding the authorship and dating of the texts, they were viewed with suspicion by such reformers as Luther (post-1516) and Calvin. The Swiss reformer characterizes Dionysius, "whoever he was," as having "skillfully discussed many matters in his *Celestial Hierarchy*," but judges the discussions to be "for the most part nothing but talk."<sup>22</sup> Luther, in his early work, *Dictata super Psalterium* (Lessons on the Psalms, generally dated between 1513 and 1515), sounds remarkably at one with Pseudo-Dionysius. Dennis Bielfeldt writes of "Luther's praise of Dionysius and the *via negativa*," further showing that "Luther points out that God dwells in 'inaccessible light' such that 'no mind is able to penetrate to him.'" Finally, Luther follows Dionysius up the ladder of negations: "Luther claims that it is Dionysius who taught the way of 'anagogical darkness' which 'ascends through negation. For thus is God hidden and incomprehensible.'"<sup>23</sup> Later, however, as David Steinmetz argues (in a summary of earlier work by Erich Vogelsang),

Luther rejected Dionysian mysticism absolutely after 1516, in spite of the fact that he makes occasional positive references to it. Dionysian mysticism is too speculative for Luther, too impatient with a God who is found in the humiliated and crucified Jesus. Rather the Dionysian mystic wishes to scamper up a graded ladder of ascent to a God who reigns in glory. But the only ladder to God, Luther believes, is the ladder provided by the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>24</sup>

Luther's rejection of Dionysian mysticism is borne out by his characterization of Dionysius as *plus platonizans quam christianizans* (more of a Platonist than a Christian):

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Indeed, to speak more boldly, it greatly displeases me to assign such importance to this Dionysius, whoever he may have been, for he shows hardly any signs of solid learning. . . . in his *Theology*, which is rightly called *Mystical*, of which certain very ignorant theologians make so much, he is downright dangerous, for he is more of a Platonist than a Christian.<sup>25</sup>

Even for Luther, however, who sees a "humiliated and crucified Jesus" as a necessary soteriological element, Steinmetz argues that "Faith penetrates the cloud beyond thinking and speaking where God dwells."<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the basic insight of Pseudo-Dionysius—that images and concepts of God, the realm of "thinking and speaking," must finally be regarded as lesser than that which lies beyond (or within) "the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (*DN 137*)—is shared even by the later, more skeptical Luther. The Milton who declares, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, that "God, as he really is, is far beyond man's imagination, let alone his understanding" (YP 6:133), or in the original, "nam Deus, prout in se est humanam cogitationem, nedum sensus longe superat,"<sup>27</sup> would have had no trouble agreeing with that basic Dionysian idea.<sup>28</sup> But Milton goes far beyond Luther here, as is evidenced by his refusal ever to imagine, fully and poetically, the very "humiliated and crucified Jesus" that Luther finds indispensable. Salvation never explicitly requires such a Jesus in Milton's poetry, and a "graded ladder of ascent"—as Steinmetz describes it—is frequently (if often obscurely) outlined for Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. For example, Barbara Lewalski maintains that Milton has Raphael encourage Adam "to love Eve's higher qualities as a means to make a Neoplatonic ascent to heavenly love" in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>29</sup> Though, according to Steinmetz, "Luther does not mean to commend speculative theology"<sup>30</sup>—even on those occasions when he seems to speak favorably of Dionysian ideas—for Milton, it is precisely such a speculative theology that appears in *Paradise Lost*, a theology that regards the divine, as it actually is, as "beyond every assertion and denial."

Milton is hardly alone in such speculative theology, nor is the judgment of Luther and Calvin on Dionysius necessarily that of Milton's

contemporaries. Examples abound: from John Everard's posthumously published translation of Dionysius in 1653; to Francis Rous, whose mysticism in *Mystical Marriage* (1631) and *Heavenly Academie* (1638) is indebted to such figures as Thomas a Kempis, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Dionysius; to the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who was deeply versed in Plotinus, Proclus, and Dionysius (as well as Tauler's mystical *Theologia Germanica*)—in Milton's lifetime, Neoplatonic and apophatic ideas return to the fore with a vengeance. In his epic, Milton actively engages with these ideas, using (as Anna Baldwin argues) "the 'emanationist' view [of nature] associated with Plotinus, [that] vivifies his understanding of nature and of man" in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>31</sup> Baldwin goes on to suggest that Milton may have found these ideas through a reading of Plotinus (either in Greek, or in the Latin translation by Ficino), but he may also have come to them indirectly. Neoplatonic ideas

were Christianized early on by Byzantine thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus, who had been assimilated into the West largely through John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century. His systematized account of Nature, the *Periphyseon*, opens with an "emanationist" explanation of how all Creation flows out from God, and is destined to ascend back to him. . . . Milton's account of nature sometimes follows Eriugena so closely as to suggest direct influence."<sup>32</sup>

Eriugena, the ninth century Irish monk whose major undertakings included Latin translations of the works of Dionysius, is almost entirely responsible for keeping Neoplatonic and apophatic ideas alive in the Latin West through the early Middle Ages (though the Eastern church always kept the Dionysian corpus as part of its Greek philosophical and theological heritage). But whether Milton adapted his theories of creation and the nature of God from those found in Eriugena, Dionysius, and Plotinus, or simply made them up out of whole cloth, the parallels between his thinking and theirs are profound. As presented in *Paradise Lost*, Milton's is an apophatic theology that gestures toward the transcendent deity by making "assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it" (*MT* 141), assertions and denials that are only hinted at in *De Doctrina Christiana*.

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De Doctrina Christiana, Paradise Lost, and Milton's Divine Representations

The relation of *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost* is a vexed one, and though I believe those who have vigorously pursued the argument that Milton was not, in fact, the author of the theological treatise have not proven their case,<sup>33</sup> the question about the extent to which the treatise can be used as a guide to the poem remains open. To what extent can the positions outlined in the treatise be ascribed to the poem?

A thought-provoking suggestion about the treatise is made by Neil Graves, who argues that Milton's theory of accommodation differs radically from the "traditional theological . . . attempt to explain the difference between the nature of God and the textual images or mental conceptions of him." This theory, which "functions by expressing the incomprehensibility of God in terms which 'accommodate' God to human understanding . . . presupposes that language cannot adequately describe God, while yet authorizing the attempt to depict him, conscious that the resulting image is not a true representation of the deity."<sup>34</sup> Graves suggests that, rather than following this traditional theory—which maintains that "God is accommodated in language through metaphor"—Milton in *De Doctrina Christiana* "envisages a synecdochic theory of scriptural accommodation" that "claims that the image embodies the truth—but not the whole truth" of God. Thus, argues Graves, when Milton writes, "God has revealed only so much of himself as our minds can bear" (YP 6:133), what he means is that "God has actually revealed himself, although incompletely, and not that he has revealed merely a symbol for himself." In discussing Milton's analysis of the "back parts" of God in Exodus, chapter 33, Graves seizes on Milton's idea that "we do not consider that what are called *the back parts* of God in Exodus xxxiii, are, strictly speaking, God, yet we do not deny that they are eternal" (YP 6.312). Graves argues that this illustrates Milton's departure from an accommodationist model: "*The back parts* themselves are not an accommodated image which bears no direct congruence to the personage of God, but instead are a partially perceived aspect of God's being itself and as an existent substance are thus accorded the predicate 'eternal.'"<sup>35</sup>

Here, the Neoplatonic underpinnings of negative theology can help bring Graves's argument into clearer focus: when Milton argues that "the back parts" are not God, but are eternal, he is not attempting to have it both ways—they either are or are not God. For Milton, they are not. But as Graves expresses it, they are "a partially perceived aspect" of God and, as such, are eternal. Plotinus (the "Father," if you will, of Neoplatonism), describes the divine in a way that helps to make sense of Milton's description of the "back parts" as eternal. The One (Plotinus's ultimate divine—beyond all categories and description) "can produce nothing less than the very greatest that is later than itself." This product of the One is "the Divine Mind," or *Nous* (the intelligent, active divine). In turn, *Nous* gives rise to "soul" or *Psyche* (the divine that can be perceived operating in humankind and the world), which "is an image and must look to its own original."<sup>36</sup> *Nous* is eternal, but it is not the One. *Psyche* is neither eternal, nor the One. But both have their source in the One, and continually look both below (*Nous* to *Psyche*, *Psyche* to the world of the senses) and back to the One. What Milton does, in explaining "the back parts" of God as eternal, is to borrow a recognizably Neoplatonic, or Plotinian, trope—explaining what might otherwise seem a metaphor ("back parts") as an emanation ("not, strictly speaking, God, yet . . . eternal"), or as Graves characterizes it, "a partially perceived aspect" of God. The back parts (or the *kavod*—rendered by the KJV as "glory") of Exodus 33:22 are not God in the sense of *containing*, rather than *being contained by*, the totality of the divine (or the One, in Plotinian terms)—after all, as Yahweh insists to Moses at 33:20, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live"—but they are, as Pseudo-Dionysius puts it, "what is next to it" (*MT* 141). In other words, in a synecdochic theory (rather than the orthodox accommodationist view), the images of God presented in Scripture would have their source, not in a divine condescension to a limited human understanding, but in a divine reality (emanation) that a limited human understanding can only partially perceive, seeing though a glass darkly, as it were. But either way, the limits of human speech and thought are the same: we make "assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it" (*MT* 141). Ultimately, all we can speak about is the image (the symbol or the

part), not what is referred to by the image (the symbolized or the whole).

Barbara Lewalski has suggested a reading of Milton's images of the divine that is quite similar to that of Graves, though she goes on to apply the theory of images in *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost*. Lewalski argues that Milton

entirely repudiates all attempts to explain what seems unworthy of God by anthropopathy (the figurative ascription of human feelings to God), making the radical claim that every aspect of God's portrayal of himself in the Bible—including his expression of humanlike emotions and his manifestation in something like human form—should form part of our conception of him.<sup>37</sup>

Milton, who avers, "We ought not to imagine that God would have said anything or caused anything to be written about himself unless he intended that it should be a part of our conception of him" (YP 6:134), is, according to Lewalski, using this idea to "find biblical warrant for portraying God as an epic character who expresses a range of emotions . . . , who makes himself visible and audible to his creatures by various means, and who engages in dialogue with his Son and with Adam."<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of their origin, and despite being what Milton characterizes in *De Doctrina Christiana* as God's own self-revelation ("God has revealed only so much of himself as our minds can bear" [YP 6:133]), these images (or revelations) are too often misunderstood by their human perceivers. In the passages Lewalski highlights, Milton repeatedly references the idea of human imagination and belief: "We ought not to *imagine*"; "*let us believe* that he did repent"; "*let us believe* that it is not beneath God to feel . . . , to be refreshed . . . , and to fear" (YP 6:134-35; emphasis added). These are not arguments about what God *is*, but about how God should be *imagined* or *understood* by human beings. Whether Milton's theory of representation is metaphorical or synecdochic, the danger is the same. Just as the danger with metaphor (the basis for orthodox accommodation theory) is that the metaphor will be concretized, that the symbolic nature of the relation of unlikes that comprises the metaphor will be lost or literalized, so the danger with synecdoche is that the part, which

merely *represents* the whole, will be mistaken *for* or *as* the whole. Taking a part of the divine, and identifying it as the whole of the divine, is just as much idolatry as is taking an accommodated image of the divine and losing track of the distinction between the image and what that image represents.

But the question of the relation of *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost* remains. Peter Herman argues that "it seems that Milton abandoned working on this text at the Restoration to concentrate on writing verse," and that "the movement from *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost* also entailed a movement from confidence to doubt."<sup>39</sup> Herman puts this "movement from confidence to doubt" in the context of a failed revolution, and a realization on Milton's part that his confidence—rooted in his image of God—had been misplaced. Milton's assertions had turned out to be disastrously wrong: "Milton built his theology and self-confidence on the reassuring certitude of God's approbation of the Revolution." In other words, "God is on the republican's side," rather than that of the royalist. If Milton is, as Herman argues, "engaged in a wholesale questioning of just about everything he had argued for in his prose works," and if "*he does not come to a conclusion*," perhaps that is because there is no positive conclusion to be reached.<sup>40</sup> In that case, what Milton struggles with in *Paradise Lost* is a project of negation, challenging or even dismantling the certainties on which he had once relied—certainties about what God is, about what God wants, about whom God supports—in favor of uncertainty, undecidability, and unknowing. The "movement from confidence to doubt" that Herman argues for can be seen as Milton's radical reevaluation of his beliefs about God. The synecdochic theory of divine imagery that Graves finds in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and that Lewalski applies to *Paradise Lost*, requires a measure of conviction that I think Milton had come to question in the years immediately following the Restoration. In essence, Milton's move from *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost* is a move away from the idolatry inherent in being *certain* about what cannot be reduced to certainty, and being *knowing* about what cannot be known in human terms.

Milton's is an argument against idolatry, no matter what the ultimate source of the "idol" may be. I believe that what Milton is

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doing in *Paradise Lost* is highlighting the distinction between the image and that which is imagined, between the metaphor and that which is represented. In so doing, Milton is making assertions and denials about what is next to the divine (the concepts and images through which humans understand and worship a "God" they can only dimly, if at all, perceive, a divinity that is far beyond their thinking and imagining), but never of the divine itself. The images of the divine that are put forward, critiqued, confidently asserted, or nervously and doubtfully expressed—these are what is next to "it," but they are not "it." *Paradise Lost*, though it has (too) often been read as if it expressed a vigorously positive theology, is a constantly shifting poetic ground, one where negation, not affirmation, is both the prime moving energy for, and the interpretive principle that makes sense of the conflicts between confidence and doubt that so often threaten to rend Milton's great epic. The conflicts are not resolved, nor can they be. They are, I believe, meant to be experienced as painful, and as irresolvable. Milton does not present what God is—indeed he cannot do so—in *Paradise Lost*. But what he can, and does, do is show his characters' various attempts along the same lines, highlighting the contradictions along the way. To each and every image that is raised, to each and every definition that is offered, the poem's response is *not this*.

*May I Express Thee Unblamed: Negative Theology in Paradise Lost*

*Paradise Lost* contains numerous passages where uncertain or contradictory ideas of God are expressed. The instances I will focus on here—the expressed ambition to "justify the wayes of God to men" of book I; the invocation to light in book 3, followed by the perspective on God of the poem's narrator; the devils' perspectives on God from books 1 and 2; Raphael's curious remark about God's mixing "destruction with creation" in his conversation with Adam; and Adam and Eve's prayer that they receive only good from God—all illustrate the doubts and incongruities that abound in *Paradise Lost* when the topic turns to the nature of the divine. Each of these constructions of the deity is an artifact that says more about the one constructing it than



it does about the deity itself. And each of these constructions is contradicted or negated almost as soon as it is made.

In the context of apophatic theology (which insists that God is above being, and therefore no being at all, a nothing, or no-thing), how can one make sense of the attempt to "justify the wayes of God to men" (1.26)? After all, it would seem to be only common sense that one "justifies," not a nothing, but a something (or a someone) that actually exists. While I have discussed elsewhere the theological implications of "justifie," the part of the famous phrase to focus on here is "the wayes of God."<sup>41</sup> Milton's famous ambition relies on a crucial distinction that is strongly reminiscent of that made by such Byzantine church figures as Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), whose Hesychast (stillness or quiet, from Greek *hesychia*) theology was affirmed by the Eastern church at the councils of 1341, 1347, and 1351 in Constantinople.<sup>42</sup> These councils established a real distinction between the unknowable essence of God and the energies or observable acts of God (what Milton calls "the wayes of God").<sup>43</sup> It is these acts (or ways) that enable humans to have a relationship with a God that is beyond their understanding. Palamas's understanding of the divine owed much to Pseudo-Dionysius and, more generally, to apophatic theology.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Milton's attempt to justify, not God, but the *ways* of God makes a distinction between the unknowable essence and the observable acts of God, a distinction that makes a positive / cataphatic argument for the possibility of human relatedness to the observable acts of God (including personal revelations of the kind found in Scripture), but also makes a negative / apophatic argument for the impossibility of knowing the God beyond names. The difference between an attempt to justify the ways of God, and an attempt to justify God could not possibly be greater—the first project, though it sounds impossibly hubristic, is quite the opposite—acknowledging the gap between human understanding and the unknowable divine essence. The second project would be hubristic in the extreme, implying that its undertaker (Milton) knew both the knowable and unknowable aspects of the divine. The difference is so great that Milton's care in spelling out which project he was undertaking must be noted, and accounted for, in reading the poem that pursues the project of justification.

The parallels between Milton's projects in *Paradise Lost* and the apophatic and Neoplatonic tradition are further demonstrated in a consideration of Milton's use of an *ex Deo* (out of God) theory of Creation. Christopher Hill contends that Milton "did not believe that God created the universe *ex nihilo*," which would have "seemed to Milton both logically meaningless and an impossible translation of the relevant Hebrew, Greek and Latin texts of the Bible. He believed in creation *ex deo*."<sup>45</sup> J. H. Adamson refers to this as Milton's "poetically conceived" theory:

It was the theory advanced by Plotinus of creation *ex Deo*, a theory dominated by the metaphor of the sun and its radiance. As the sun poured out an eternal stream of light, so the Uncreated Essence overflowed with life which penetrated down into all levels of being. Having reached the lowest level, it turned again and, yearning for its source, traveled back through the levels of being until it once more reached the Divine.<sup>46</sup>

For Pseudo-Dionysius, creation is accomplished by emanation, a process through which the divine is "enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things" (*DN* 82). This divine that abides within all things is what the Eastern Hesychast tradition refers to as the energies of God (essentially, the divine as manifested in creation). For Milton, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and again later in *Paradise Lost*, God creates not *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) but out of preexisting material that was part of God's own substance.<sup>47</sup> Though neither of these ideas is a precise analogy to the unwilled process of emanation as explained by Plotinus in the *Enneads* (5.1.6), or the course of procession and reversion outlined by Proclus in *The Elements of Theology* (sections 25-39),<sup>48</sup> they are analogous to the extent that each idea insists that the creation shares intimately in the nature of the Creator.<sup>49</sup> But how can that shared nature be realized if the divine is only knowable "through a glass darkly," through the acts, energies, or "wayes of God to men"? This can not, certainly, be accomplished merely through the established rites and rituals of the external church (West or East)—though as long as the symbolic nature of these rites and rituals is not forgotten, as long as the metaphor is not concretized, and the symbol

mistaken for that to which it merely points, such churches can serve a valuable function. No, something more is needed. It is this something more that is imagined by Dionysius as a wordless, silent state beyond concepts and images. It is this something more that Gregory Palamas imagined as the *hesychia*, the quiet, the stillness necessary to achieve spiritual union with God through a vision of divine light. It is this something more that Milton imagines in terms remarkably similar to the inner light of his contemporaries, the Quakers, an idea to which he gave poetic expression as "A Paradise within thee, happier farr" (10.1478) than the Eden of Adam and Eve.

With the distinction between God and the ways of God, however, comes the tension between positive and negative approaches to the divine. The tensions between positive and negative theologies, between the ideas that the divine can, and cannot, be known or imagined are especially evident in the invocation to light of book 3.<sup>50</sup>

Hail holy light, ofspring of Heav'n first-born,  
Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam  
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is light,  
And never but in unapproach'd light  
Dwelt from Eternitie, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.  
Or hear'st thou rather pure Ethereal stream,  
Whose Fountain who shall tell? before the Sun,  
Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice  
Of God, as with a Mantle didst invest  
The rising world of waters dark and deep,  
Won from the void and formless infinite. (3.1-12)<sup>51</sup>

This invocation expresses both positive (in the sense of *posited*) images of the divine, and a corresponding unease about the appropriateness, the limits, even the accuracy of those images. Starting with "holy light," an abstract image that manages to make the divine available to the human visual imagination without anthropomorphic imagery, the invocation moves immediately to something more concrete, more human: "ofspring of Heav'n first-born." But then the narrator immediately retreats back into the abstract, and still more abstract: what, after all, is an "Eternal Coeternal beam"? The images

so far on offer exist in a liminal space between the almost purely conceptual and abstract ("Eternal Coeternal beam"), the ethereal yet measurable ("holy light"—a phrase that holds together both the immeasurable—"holiness"—and the measurable—"light"), and the anthropomorphic ("offspring" and "first-born"). What follows, however, is the key to the entire invocation: "May I express thee unblam'd?" The question is asked in all seriousness—may I, without blame, without fault, without making a fundamental error, use *any* of the aforementioned images as ways of truly expressing (not just describing, but capturing, through words and images, the reality, the substance of that which is described—think of "express" as ex-press: to press out or squeeze out) the divine? May I, without reducing the object of my description, express the divine with words? Does even the very process of such expression reduce the irreducible, take as an object that which is not any kind of object, treat as a noun requiring a predicate that upon which no thing can be predicated? The dilemma is palpable, confusing, and urgent. If the divine cannot be described, cannot be expressed, how ever can this poem achieve its stated ambition to "justifie the wayes of God to men" ( 1.26)?

The very next phrase seems to indicate a return of confidence, a return, at least, of confidence in language's facility for describing God: "God is light." But the language quickly becomes unsteady, indicating uncertainty about the relationship of God and light that had seemed certain and easily defined in the initial three-word phrase. If "God is light" and "never but in unapproached light / Dwelt from Eternitie" and "dwelt then in thee," then a tenuous equation seems to hold between God, the dwelling place of God, and the "thee" being addressed in the invocation.<sup>52</sup> Who, or what, is being addressed here? Is it the Son, who will play so crucial a role in the rest of book 3? Is it the Father, with whom the Son will argue for mercy to be shown to as-yet-unfallen humankind? Is it what a Trinitarian Christian might refer to as the Holy Spirit ("hail holy light")? Is it the poetic muse? Is it Wisdom or *Hokmah*, the feminine figure who existed with God before Creation, and was by his side, "daily his delight, rejoicing always before him" (Prov. 8:30) as the works of creation unfolded?

Milton is addressing all of these things. But more importantly, he is addressing none of these things. In a few brief lines, Milton's

poetry both proffers and withdraws positive (or posited) images and ideas through which the divine might be understood in—or reduced to—human terms and concepts. "God is light" and dwells in "unapproached light" from "Eternitie," and "dwelt then in thee / Bright effluence of bright essence increate." Here is a profusion of concepts and images (naturalistic, philosophical, Trinitarian) offered as ways of understanding the divine. But then—immediately—doubt creeps in, with the use of a single word: "or".<sup>53</sup> "Or hear'st thou rather pure Ethereal stream, / Whose Fountain who shall tell?" Or is it none of these things, neither light, nor offspring, neither the "Eternal Coeternal beam" nor of the "Eternal Coeternal beam"? Perhaps it is (or is of) this "Ethereal stream" with a source (or without a source?) that cannot be told, or even known.

Perhaps. And perhaps not. The undecidability, the unknowability, is the point. Conventional explanations that would have readers understanding this passage as a repetition of the standard epic call to the muse, or an Arian description of the subordinate nature of the Son's relation to the Father, or an "orthodox" treatment of the Son / Father relationship that merely nods toward either Antitrinitarianism or "subordinationism" all remain firmly within the positive tradition.<sup>54</sup> These explanations insist that Milton is trying to force his poetry to say—in one way, or in several contradictory ways—that God *is* this, or God *is* that. However, the structure of the invocation, the alternating moments of confidence and doubt, and the profusion of definitions that are no sooner offered than negated argue for a different way of understanding Milton's project here, and throughout *Paradise Lost*. Just as for Pseudo-Dionysius, so for Milton, "the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming" (*MT* 139). Milton's narrator is expressing, not God, but the state that Dionysius describes as "the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (*DN* 137). The narrator does not know—*cannot know*—to whom or to what he is referring in this invocation.<sup>55</sup> Henry Vaughan, in his poem "The Night," achieves much the same effect as does Milton in describing the indescribable: "There is in God (some say) / A deep, but dazzling darkness" (49-50)—a darkness that represents, poetically, the inability of humans to see and think beyond the limits of their senses and intellects. But where

Vaughan seems to take this state of affairs as a given (ending the poem by wishing for "that night! Where I in him / Might live invisible and dim" [53-54]),<sup>56</sup> Milton throughout *Paradise Lost* pushes, with almost Samsonic force, against the limits of his descriptive capabilities, having his various characters try one, and then another, and still another image or concept that might be used to nail down the nature of the divine, to shine a light on that deep but dazzling darkness. But each description, each light, tells the reader more about the describer, about the shiner of the light, than it does about the ostensible object being described and illuminated. In essence, each character in *Paradise Lost* creates his or her own "God," as can be seen through a comparison of the narrator, Satan and his "infernal crew," Adam and Eve, and Raphael.

The narrator gives us "the Almighty Father" who "High Thron'd above all highth, bent down his eye, / His own works and their works at once to view" (3.56, 58-59). This God is, like Lear, every inch a king—a deliverer of imperious pronouncements who will thunder forth with the emotion of the moment and then just as quickly retreat into mildness and affectionate regard. His speech on the Fall of mankind (3.80-134) is a masterpiece of emotional volatility, rising from the flat desert plains of the consideration of "our adversarie, whom no bounds / Prescrib'd, no barrs of Hell / ... can hold" (81-82, 84) to the volcanic peaks of his rage against humanity, "whose fault? / Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee / All he could have" (96-98), to the self-justifying descent into equivocation, "if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault, / Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown" (117-19), before finally coming to rest in the valley of mercy, "Mercy first and last shall brightest shine" (134). A deity this volatile is far from the impassible "Unmoved Mover" of Aristotle, or the character that Stanley Fish describes as one whose "presentation is determinedly non-affective."<sup>57</sup> The narrator constructs a God very much along the lines of the biblical Yahweh—"Great are thy works, *Jehovah*, infinite / Thy power" (7.602-03)—and Yahweh is about as passible and affective as deities get.<sup>58</sup>

The God constructed by Satan and his compatriots is quite different, colder, more calculating, and infinitely more in control than the

narrator's God.<sup>59</sup> Satan's God is a tyrant, "hee / Who now is Sovran" (1.245-46), who had long "Sat on his Throne, upheld by old repute, / Content or custome" (1.639-40) while slyly not showing all in order to tempt Satan into the very misstep he has just made: "but still his strength conceal'd, / Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall" (1.641-42). In the debate scenes of book 2, the demons construct a portrait of a God whose wrath is premeditated, a deliberate strategy rather than a spontaneous outpouring of negative emotion (in contrast to the God the narrator describes). For Moloch, God is a "Torturer" (2.64), but one who inflicts pain coldly, through technology and invention, what Moloch describes as "*Tartarean* Sulphur, and strange fire, / His own invented Torments" (2.69-70). Belial, on the other hand, pictures God as an all-seeing eye (my apologies to J. R. R. Tolkien and Peter Jackson): "what can force or guile / With him, or who deceive his mind, whose eye / Views all things at one view?" (2.188-90). Belial also sees God as a judge who might, just *might*, be placated into giving the demons, if not time off, at least tortures off for good behavior: "Our Supream Foe in time may much remit / His anger, and perhaps thus farr remov'd / Not mind us not offending" (2.210-12). Mammon sees God as both a tyrant and a master of shifting appearances—Mammon's God is at once the object of bile in the phrase "how wearisom / Eternity so spent in worship paid / To whom we hate" (2.247-49), and a dweller in darkness, deep but dazzling in its own way:

How oft amidst  
Thick clouds and dark doth Heav'ns all-ruling Sire  
Choose to reside, his Glory unobscur'd,  
And with the Majesty of darkness round  
Covers his Throne; from whence deep thunders roar  
Must'ring thir rage, and Heav'n resembles Hell? (2.263-68)

For the demons, God is a tyrant who can only be dealt with head-on, a torturer who can only be fought with his own inventions, a judge who *might* be reasoned with or placated, and an implacable tyrant who can neither be reasoned with nor overcome, but whose facility with appearances might profitably be imitated. Beelzebub and Satan put the finishing touches on this incoherent picture by positing a God

who cannot be placated, reasoned with, or attacked head-on, but who *can* (despite Belial's picture of God as an all-seeing eye) be fought indirectly, by attacking the outermost and least-defended portion of creation: Earth and its inhabitants, Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve's constructions of God, as well as that implied in Raphael's story of Creation, revolve around anxiety, specifically a fear that God is just as capable of and inclined to providing evil as he is disposed to providing good. Where the narrator's God is emotionally volatile, the God constructed by Adam, Eve, and Raphael is quite nearly schizophrenic. Fear—in the sense of terror, not respect—is the primary response to such a deity. Eve, who in book 5 dreams of the tree of life, and of her own future action of eating from it, elicits just such fear in herself and in Adam, who begins to worry over Eve, the source of the dream, the nature of evil, and the ability of God to entertain, and possibly act upon, evil:

The trouble of thy thoughts this night in sleep  
Affects me equally; nor can I like  
This uncouth dream, of evil sprung I fear;  
Yet evil whence? in thee can harbour none,  
Created pure.                   .....

Evil into the mind of God or Man  
May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave  
No spot of blame behind: Which gives me hope  
That what in sleep thou didst abhor to dream,  
Waking thou never wilt consent to do.                   (5.96-100, 117-21)

Evil thoughts may, and do, come, says Adam, but as long as we do not act upon such thoughts, such evil leaves no taint, does no damage. So far, so good. But Adam's explanation is made to seem like so much whistling past the graveyard when he and Eve specifically pray that they be given only good by God, praying, in essence, that God lets whatever evil comes into his mind pass unapproved, and unacted upon:

Hail universal Lord, be bounteous still  
To give us onely good; and if the night  
Have gathered aught of evil or conceald,  
Disperse it, as now light dispels the dark.                   (5.205-08)



Why is such a prayer necessary? An invocation requesting "onely good" from God—one that regards such good as a bounty or boon from the deity at that—is a tacit admission that the speaker of the invocation regards God as a potential source of good *and* evil. Much like the God spoken of in Job 2:10, a deity from whose hands "we receive good" and "receive evil" (or like the deity spoken of at Lamentations 3:38, where the question is asked: "Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good?"), the figure to whom Adam prays here, though *currently* a benefactor, is clearly also regarded as a potential threat.

This image of God is reinforced by Raphael's curious characterization of the Father as being quite capable of mixing destruction with creation, and doing so as the result of a temper tantrum. Raphael cannot give Adam a firsthand account of Adam's creation (thus opening the door for Adam to do so himself), because he had been sent on a mission:

For I that Day was absent, as befell,  
Bound on a voyage uncouth and obscure,  
Fan on excursion toward the Gates of Hell;  
Squar'd in full Legion (such command we had)  
To see that none thence issu'd forth a spie,  
Or enemie, while God was in his work,  
Least hee incenst at such eruption bold,  
Destruction with Creation might have mixt. (7.866-73)

Unlike Adam, who seems to hope against hope that the God he fears will not act upon the evil that comes into his mind, Raphael takes for granted, not only that God *can* but that God *will* act upon such evil, and all because he cannot control his anger. But it gets better (or worse, depending on your point of view)—Raphael's God is not just irrational, not just temperamental, not just inclined to destructive behavior: no, Raphael's God is also a royal hypocrite (literally). The offered rationale for mixing destruction with creation is the "eruption bold" of a "spie" or "enemie" from hell, who might catch a glimpse of the creative process in action, and thus spoil it by causing God to lose his temper and break the very thing(s) he had been making. (Here, Raphael's God appears as an auteur in high dudgeon—a volatile and high-maintenance *artiste* who would not be out

of place in any high-culture capital today.) To avert this destructive scene, Raphael testifies that he was sent with a full legion to prevent a jailbreak, thus warding off both the intrusion and the tantrum. But such an "eruption bold" could only have happened, as Raphael explains, because God *allowed* it to happen:

Not that they durst without his leave attempt,  
But us he sends upon his high behests  
For state, as Sovran King, and to enure  
Our prompt obedience. (7.874-77)

In other words, Raphael was sent on a mission in order to prevent an "eruption bold" that he would have been unable to prevent—because it would have been undertaken with the permission of the very God who sent Raphael in the first place—and the mission was assigned, not with any realistic prospects of success in mind, but simply to further ingrain obedience (to even the most irrational of commands) in the already obsequious angel.<sup>60</sup> Since the entire bizarre mission was undertaken, according to Raphael, to deflect the possibility that God "Destruction with Creation might have mixt" (7.873), it seems then that Raphael and his crew were especially "Glad [to have] return'd up to the coasts of Light" after having found "fast shut / The dismal Gates" (7.883, 877-78), and glad primarily from a sense of relief that God's violence (rather than Satan's) had been forestalled.

Each of the preceding examples shows characters (the narrator, Satan and his angels, Adam and Eve, and Raphael) whose thinking is firmly ensconced within a positive theological framework—for these characters, God *is* what they perceive him to be and what they define him as being. But each definition is different, often quite radically so, from every other definition—and the individual definitions are often themselves contradictory or tentative. Satan, for example, defines God as a tyrant in books 1 and 2, but seems to waver in the famous soliloquy of book 4, only to return to his earlier definition. Adam and Eve are certain that God is good, except when they fear that God is not good (or is, at least, *potentially* not good or the potential source of that which is not good). Raphael cheerfully assumes that the human pair's fears are correct—God *is* the source of destruction.

But Raphael also defines God as the source of a perfect creation—despite what he seems to think is the very real possibility that the very same God might, at any moment, have mixed destruction into his creation:

O *Adam*, one Almighty is, from whom  
All things proceed, and up to him return,  
If not deprav'd from good, created all  
Such to perfection, one first matter all. (5.469-72)

So which is it? Is God good? Yes. Is God potentially evil? Yes. Is God almighty? Yes. Is God light? Yes. Is God a king? Yes. Is God a tyrant? Yes.

But no.

The contradictions, the descriptions that offer first one image of God and then another—very different—image, are included, even highlighted in *Paradise Lost* in order to make a simple, but supremely important point: these "Gods" are not God. The narrator's abstract light image is not God. The narrator's glorious king is not God. Satan's dark, opprobrious tyrant is not God. Adam and Eve's provider of good, who is still "bounteous" enough not to bring evil, is not God. Raphael's preemptory and obedience-inuring commander is not God. Each and every one of these constructions says more about the speaker than about what is ostensibly being spoken of or described. What each of Milton's characters worships, fears, loves, resents, or merely speaks of, is an idol, in Marion's terms, rather than an icon. The narrator's king is not transparent to transcendence, pointing beyond himself, but is opaque, pointing rather insistently right at himself. Satan's tyrant is not transparent to transcendence either, and in fact is so opaque an idol that it is just as insistent in pointing at Satan and the Father (or the God-image Satan has created) as it is in not pointing beyond itself to an ineffable, unknowable God. A tyrant, after all, is neither ineffable nor unknowable.

Why does Milton, the famous iconoclast, present such a profusion of divine imagery in *Paradise Lost*? Like so many other religious thinkers who have come to the point that they are ready—even impelled in some way—to move beyond images, Milton is attempting, in the terms of Meister Eckhart's famous prayer to be able "for

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God's sake [. . . to] take leave of god,"<sup>61</sup> to leave off worshipping that which he understands (his own images and concepts of God) and begin worshipping that which he does not, and can never, fully understand—the God beyond names. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton creates and rejects images of God—showing the divine as a warrior king, as a tyrant, as a creator and destroyer, a deliverer of sometimes irrational-seeming commands, an imperious figure whose sole delight is in obsequious shows of obedience and submission, and even as a tentatively conceived abstraction (light)—in order to emphasize that such images are merely images, generated by and for human beings. In making such a point, Milton refuses to take comfort by applying what Neil Graves suggests is the synecdochic theory of divine representation in *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost*, and in so refusing, Milton moves away, as Peter Herman suggests, from the "reassuring certitude of God's approbation" as part of an overall "movement from confidence to doubt."<sup>62</sup>

In so moving, Milton is swimming directly upstream. At a time when God is loudly asserted to be the avenger of sins, a bringer of plague and fire, and either an Anglican or Nonconformist partisan, the 1667 edition of *Paradise Lost* is at least as bold as any of Milton's earlier prose works—whether against the episcopacy or the monarchy—because this time the "double tyranny, of Custom from without and blind affections within" (YP 3:190) that Milton takes on is nothing less than the "tyrannie" inherent in imagining God as one's own partisan.

Here, perhaps, a comparison to our own day may be in order, given that God is again being invoked to explain disasters that have brought death and destruction after them. Fawzan Al-Fawzan, a professor at Al-Imam University in Saudi Arabia, claimed—in a television interview about the devastating tsunami of December 2004 in Indonesia—that "these great tragedies and collective punishments that are wiping out villages, towns, cities and even entire countries, are Allah's punishments of the people of these countries."<sup>63</sup> In 2001, the American televangelist Jerry Falwell, in an interview on fellow televangelist Pat Robertson's show, *700 Club*, declared that the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers were a result of God's judgment on a sinful United States of America:

what we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be miniscule if, in fact God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve. . . . God will not be mocked. . . . I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen."<sup>64</sup>

Make a few minor alterations to the names of the groups being accused, as well as the roll call of so-called sins, and this statement could very well have been made in response to the disasters of mid-1660s London, where sexual, epicurean, and various other broadly ideological "sins" were blamed for the tragedies of plague and fire. It is precisely this kind of thinking, this knowingness about the judgments (or nonjudgments) of God, that Milton is rejecting in *Paradise Lost*. In the England of the mid-1660s, there were more than enough Robert Elboroughs and Thomas Vincents declaring death and destruction to be the punishments inflicted by God on a wayward and sinful people. In publishing *Paradise Lost* in 1667, in this milieu of hysteria, presumption, and idolatry posing as piety, Milton is not seeking to join their numbers, but is, instead, throwing down his gauntlet in response to those who would presume to know the unknowable.<sup>65</sup> In undertaking to "justifie the wayes of God to men" (1.26), Milton presents so bewildering a variety of conceptions of who that "God" is, and what those "wayes" are, that it finally becomes impossible to decide between them. Looked at from one perspective, *Paradise Lost* becomes a celebration of the perfections of divine kingship.<sup>66</sup> From another perspective, *Paradise Lost* becomes a critique of images of kingship, both human and divine, a critique, in fact, of the habit of imagining the transcendent deity in the terms of a human political role.<sup>67</sup> Much ink can be spilled arguing which of these—or many others—opposing perspectives on Milton's "God" (the character he creates) is correct. But such arguments, I think, are all part of the overall structure of the attempt to see Milton's work in—or force his work into—the terms of a rarely questioned "positive" theology. In this essay I hope to have stepped outside the positive (cataphatic) tradition of reading Milton's "God," but I must

make my point as clearly and forcefully as I can: we have missed the point.

We have gotten Milton wrong in a crucial way.

To the extent that any of us interpret Milton's great epic as if he were trying to define what God actually *is*, I believe we are fundamentally misreading the poem. By reading Milton as if he were using the occasion of an epic poem to defend that God against charges of wickedness, although demonstrating, rather than defusing the charges,<sup>68</sup> we miss something crucial. Likewise, in reading Milton as if he were using his poem to demonstrate the goodness of the same God,<sup>69</sup> or using the epic to demonstrate the sinfulness of the reader who does not immediately and consistently agree that the goodness of God has, indeed, been demonstrated<sup>70</sup> we have missed an essential feature of *Paradise Lost*. We have taken Milton's repeated examples of *not this, not this*, as if they were positive statements, as if they were *this, this*. Published at a time when all too many of Milton's contemporaries were positive they knew both that God *had* chosen to bring plague and fire down upon London, and *why* God had chosen to visit such disasters on the city's people, *Paradise Lost* tried valiantly then, as it continues to try now, to pull its readers up the graded ladder of ascent from such easy and idolatrous certitudes to the mysterious darkness of unknowing. The multiplicity of perspectives on "God" in *Paradise Lost*, which, like the garden therein, "with wanton growth derides / Tending to wilde" (8.211-12), serves not to define the deity, but instead to call attention to the limits—and dangers—of the attempt at definition itself.

*Notes to Bryson, "The Mysterious Darkness of Unknowing"*

1. Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), writes of the difficulty the poem faced: "That Milton's poem was sent forth into the world bare and unaccommodated suggests that likely presenters and commenders had qualms about associating themselves with the rebel Milton's return to print" (456). The six different title pages under which the ten-book *Paradise Lost* appeared over the next three years are explained by Lewalski as "a strategy to make it more widely available, spread the risk, and promote sales" (456). John Shawcross, "The Life of Milton," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 1st ed., ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), also notes several possible difficulties the poem faced on the market: "*Paradise Lost* did not sell well for perhaps a number of reasons: its length, its subject, its blank verse, its narrative difficulty; the recovery of the times which was still going on; [and] the generally altered literary climate" (17).

2. Nicholas von Maltzahn, "The First Reception of *Paradise Lost* (1667)," *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. 47 (November 1996), notes that the spare quality of the first printing of *Paradise Lost* was considered highly (and detrimentally) unusual: "Citing booksellers' demands, a contemporary could observe generally that 'tis neither usual nor handsome, to leap immediately from the Title-Page to the matter" (479).

3. Lewalski, *Life of John Milton*, 460.

4. Von Maltzahn, "First Reception," emphasizes that "the events of 1659-60 have been seen as crucial to Milton's production of *Paradise Lost*" but goes on to argue that "those of 1666-7 [are] crucial to the publication and first reception of the epic" (480).

5. Robert Elborough, *London's Calamity by Fire* (London: 1666), 19-20.

6. Thomas Vincent, *Gods Terrible Voice in the City*, 5th ed. (London, 1667), 9, 12.

7. *Ibid.*, 109, 116, 143.

8. *Ibid.*, 20, 23.

9. Lewalski, *Life of John Milton*, 452.

10. In his prose, such as the following from *A Defence of the People of England*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-82), hereafter cited as YP, Milton constructed a God in his own antimonarchical image: "A republican form of government ... seemed to God more advantageous [than monarchy] for his chosen people" (4:344). In essence, Milton had once been positive that God was antimonarchical, just as positive as Salmasius had been that God was a monarch (and pro monarchy). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton creates doubt about such firmly delineated ideas and categories, picturing God as a tyrannical monarch, Satan as a republican hypocrite who himself aspires to monarchy, and the Son as a balancing figure that aspires to the end of heavenly monarchy—taking up the regal scepter, only to lay it down.

11. In "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Languages of the Unsayable*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press,

1996), 3-70, Derrida states, "negative theologies . . . are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being" (63n). In my view, negative theology and deconstruction are remarkably similar in technique, though different in their final aim. To posit even something so nearly infinitely deferred as a God beyond God, or Jean Luc Marion's "God without Being" may involve a move more "positive" than Derrida—even in his final period—was able or willing to align himself with. Where negative theology might be described as an attempt to silence, or get beyond, language, deconstruction argues the impossibility of success in such an attempt.

12. All quotations of Dionysius are from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Such quotations are cited parenthetically as either *DN* (*Divine Names*) or *MT* (*Mystical Theology*).

13. The basic argument is this: Pseudo-Dionysius is "Pseudo" because, given the pervasive presence of the fifth century A.D. philosopher Proclus's ideas and language in the Dionysian texts, it is impossible that the Dionysius of *The Mystical Theology* is actually the Dionysius of Acts 17:34.

14. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, trans. E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 111.

15. "All that participates is inferior to the participated, and this latter to the unparticipated," or the One. "The unparticipated (the One), then, precedes the participated, and these the participants" (*ibid.*, 29).

16. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, introduction to *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

17. Nicholas of Cusa, "On Learned Ignorance," *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 126.

18. Michael Lieb, *The Visionary Mode: Biblical Prophecy, Hermeneutics, and Cultural Change* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 236-37.

19. Marion, *God Without Being*, 16, 18.

20. *Ibid.*, 13, 14.

21. The *Mystical Theology* was published in 1653, in an English translation by John Everard, appended to Everard's *Some Gospel Treasures Opened*. It also appeared alone, in the same translation, under the title *The Mystical Divinity of Dionysius the Areopagite* in 1657. Though Milton could certainly have read Dionysius in Greek or Latin translation, the English translation made Dionysius available to a far wider audience, and enables a "fit" audience (though few) to have the background of ideas necessary to recognize apophatic ideas in *Paradise Lost*.

22. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 164.



23. Dennis Bielfeldt, "Deification as a Motif in Luther's *Dictata super psalterium*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28 (Summer 1997): 416.
24. David C. Steinmetz, "Religious Ecstasy in Staupitz and the Young Luther," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (Spring 1980): 23-24.
25. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, trans. A. T. W. Steinhaeuser, in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther, 1517-1520*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 461.
26. Steinmetz, "Religious Ecstasy," 36.
27. Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*, in *The Works of John Milton*, 18 vols. in 21, ed. Frank Allen Patterson et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-38), 14:30; hereafter cited as CM followed by volume and page number.
28. "For God, as he is in himself, is far above human thinking, much more so of human senses." Milton's Latin can be read as suggesting that God is beyond both human understanding (abstract intellection) and human sense (felt perception or intuitive apprehension). In fact, *sensus* could be rendered in physical terms (feeling, perception, sensation), emotional terms (affection, emotion, feeling, sentiment), or in terms of human opinion or point of view (moral sense, opinion, thought). Thus, the difficulty of Milton's statement about just how far God exceeds human capacities is in knowing exactly which capacities are being referred to: in my view, Milton is taking full advantage of the multivalent quality of *sensus* in order to argue that *all* human capacities-intellectual, emotional, physical-are grossly insufficient for the most basic level of understanding, apprehending, perceiving, and relating to the divine.
29. Lewalski, *Life of John Milton*, 480. For an opposing perspective, see Clay Daniels, "Milton's Neo-Platonic Angel?" *SEL* 44 (Winter 2004): 173-88. Daniels argues that "whatever Neo-Platonism's influence on Milton, the ladder of love is not central to Milton's thinking and would not seem to merit divine endorsement, especially at this critical moment of the poem" (173).
30. Steinmetz, "Religious Ecstasy," 36.
31. Anna Baldwin, "Platonic Ascents and Descents in Milton," in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 151.
32. *Ibid.*, 154.
33. See Barbara Lewalski, John Shawcross, and William Hunter on this debate in "Forum: Milton's Christian Doctrine," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 32 (Winter 1992): 143-66.
34. Neil D. Graves. "Milton and the Theory of Accommodation," *Studies in Philology* 98 (2001): 251.
35. Quotations in this paragraph are from, respectively, *ibid.*, 253, 252, 261, 262.
36. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.1.6, trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol. 17, *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Britannica, 1955), 211.
37. Lewalski, *Life of John Milton*, 420.
38. *Ibid.*, 420.
39. Peter C. Herman, "*Paradise Lost*, the Miltonic 'Or,' and the Poetics

of Incertitude," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43 (Winter 2003): 202-03.

40. *Ibid.*, 203, 183; emphasis in the original.

41. Michael Bryson, *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton's Rejection of God as King* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 119-23.

42. John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 174-75.

43. The dilemma was over how to speak of a God who cannot be known directly but can be known experientially, the latter a knowledge the Hesychast monks claimed to have achieved. Thus, the split between divine essence (*ousia*) and divine activities (*energeia*) was adopted: "If God was absolutely transcendent, but also could be 'experienced' and 'seen' as an uncreated and real Presence, one had to speak both of a totally transcendent divine 'essence' and of uncreated but revealed 'energies'" (*ibid.*, 174).

44. "The novelty of Palamite theology consisted in the fundamental reinterpretation of emphases going back to Origen and Dionysius the Areopagite, despite a continuing reverence for Dionysius"; see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol 2., *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 262.

45. Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 324. Hill goes on to put Milton in the context of the fifteenth century Neoplatonists and the Hermetic tradition, and also connects Milton, through the *ex Deo* theory of Creation, to such groups as the Familists—among whose members was John Everard, the seventeenth century translator of Pseudo-Dionysius—and such followers of Jacob Boehme as Charles Hotham, who "defended Boehme's doctrines at Cambridge, rejecting creation *ex nihilo* in favor of creation from the matter of the abyss" (329), and John Pordage, who "believed that he was summarizing Boehme when he argued, with Milton, that God created the universe out of himself" (330).

46. J. H. Adamson, "The Creation," in *Bright Essence: Studies in Milton's Theology*, ed. William B. Hunter, C. A. Patrides, and J. H. Adamson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 83.

47. For example, in *Paradise Lost* Raphael defines God as the one from whom "All things proceed, and up to him return, / If not deprav'd from good . . . / one first matter all" (5.469-72). Later, the Father himself claims to be the source of all matter: "I am who fill / Infinitude" (7.168-69). In *Doctrina Christiana* (1.7), Milton argues that

matter must either have always existed independently of God, or have originated from God at some particular point of time. That matter should have been always independent of God, . . . that matter, I say, should have existed of itself from all eternity, is inconceivable. There remains, therefore, but one solution of the difficulty, for which moreover we have the authority of Scripture, namely, that all things are of God. (CM 15:19, 21)

48. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 29-43.

49. Analogous enough, in fact, that Regina Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theology and Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8-9, adopts Neoplatonist language when she describes "Milton's creation [as] an emanation of divine goodness." (Schwartz, however, argues cogently for a distinction between the way Milton treats the idea of Creation in the treatise and the way he treats the same idea in the poem: "When he objects to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in *De Doctrina*, Milton tells us, with Lear, that nothing can come of nothing. Nonetheless, his chaos owes a far heavier debt to the Augustinian understanding of evil as privation than he would ever acknowledge in prose" (19). This privation can, as Schwartz suggests, be understood in Plotinian (or Neoplatonist) terms. Quoting from the first Ennead, eighth tractate, Schwartz argues for a strong resemblance between Plotinus's "expanded definition of evil" and Milton's poetic descriptions of chaos: "Evil is that kind whose place is below all the patterns, forms, shapes, measurements, and limits, that which has no trace of good by any title of its own but (at best) takes order and grace from some principle outside itself" (13).

50. See Merritt Hughes, "Milton and the Symbol of Light," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 4 (Winter 1964): 1-33; and Albert Cirillo, "'Hail Holy Light' and Divine Time in *Paradise Lost*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 68 (1969): 45-56. The essential work along these lines, however, is in Michael Lieb's *Poetics of the Holy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981). See especially 185-210.

51. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Milton's poetry are from the 1667 edition of *Paradise Lost* as presented in a facsimile edition by The Scolar Press, Menston, Yorkshire, England, 1968. I have modernized the typography, but have retained the spelling of the facsimile edition.

52. Lieb, *Poetics of the Holy*, 212, explains the tension between God as light and God *dwelling in* light in terms of the concepts that are used in the Greek and Hebrew scriptures, respectively.

53. For a thorough and provocative discussion of the role of "or" in *Paradise Lost*, see Herman, "*Paradise Lost*, the Miltonic 'Or.'" See, especially, his discussion of incertitude in the invocation to light of book 3 (186-87) and his argument that there are two raisings of the Son, whose priority cannot be decided, in books 3 and 5 (198-201). Herman's arguments are extended and expanded upon in his *Destabilizing Milton: "Paradise Lost" and the Poetics of Incertitude* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

54. For an overview of the debate over Milton's theology and whether it is most accurately described as "Arian," "Antitrinitarian," or "subordinationist," see (among many others) the following authors. For the Arian / Antitrinitarian Milton, see John Rumrich, "Milton's Arianism: Why It Matters," in *Milton and Heresy*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75-92. For longer and more in-depth arguments for Milton as Arian, see Michael Bauman, *Milton's Arianism* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987). On the "subordinationist" side of this controversy, the use of the term "Arianism," is disputed by John

Shawcross, "Forum: Milton's Christian Doctrine," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 32 (Winter 1992): 156. See also Shawcross, *With Mortal Voice: The Creation of "Paradise Lost"* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 181 n. 2. For more in-depth treatments of the arguments for Milton as subordinationist (but not Arian or Antitrinitarian), see the individual chapters on Milton's relation to Arianism by Hunter, Adamson, and Patrides in *Bright Essence*.

55. Lieb, *Poetics of the Holy*, 186-87, describes "Milton's song to 'holy Light,'" as an "act of expressing the inexpressibility of the ineffable," and as "his way of declaring his devotion to the mysterium."

56. Henry Vaughan, "The Night," in *Major Poets of the Earlier Seventeenth Century*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski and Andrew J. Sabol (New York: Odyssey Press, 1991), 579-81.

57. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost,"* 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 62.

58. In two articles, Michael Lieb has written persuasive arguments for Milton's God as a passible character: "Reading God: Milton and the Anthropopathic Tradition," in *Milton Studies*, vol. 25, ed. Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), and "Milton's 'Dramatick Constitution': The Celestial Dialogue in *Paradise Lost*, Book DI," in *Milton Studies*, vol. 23, ed. James D. Simmonds (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987).

59. It is, of course, true that all of the speeches of Satan, Raphael, Adam, Eve, and the others are delivered through the filter of the narrator. Thus it might be argued that the narrator's construction of God is also Satan's construction, and Adam's construction, and so on. Such an argument is entirely valid, but it does not address (much less obviate) the primary point: positive descriptions of deity abound in *Paradise Lost*, but not one of them penetrates "the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (DN 137). *Paradise Lost* offers numerous partial images, and partial descriptions of a God that, in the final analysis, it cannot express "unblamed."

60. In *Poetics of the Holy*, Lieb argues that Milton deliberately writes God as a deliverer of arbitrary—even irrational—commands: "Having categorically dismissed natural and moral laws as the underlying principle of the first prohibition, Milton postulates a situation in which a command is issued in order to impose upon man a deliberately arbitrary injunction that *by its very nature* runs counter to the dictates of human reason" (94; emphasis in the original). Take that description of the command not to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and transpose it to an angelic key, and you have a nice description of the command to Raphael.

61. *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 204.

62. Herman, *Destabilizing Milton*, 203.

63. From a transcript by the Middle East Media Research Institute of a December 31, 2004, interview on Al-Majd television, clip no. 459; available at <http://www.memritv.org/Transcript.asp?P1=459>. The video is also available at <http://memritv.org/Search.asp?ACT=S6&P3=3#>.

64. From a transcript of the September 13, 2001, *700 Club* interview; available at <http://www.commondreams.org/news2001/0917-03.htm>. In the firestorm of controversy that immediately followed his remarks, Falwell seemed to backpedal, quoted in the *New York Times* the following day as saying that "he did not believe God 'had anything to do with the tragedy,' but that God had permitted it. 'He lifted the curtain of protection . . . and I believe that if America does not repent and return to a genuine faith and dependence on him, we may expect more tragedies, unfortunately.'" See Gustav Niebuhr, "Finding Fault: U.S. 'Secular' Groups Set Tone for Terror Attacks, Falwell Says," *New York Times*, September 14, 2001, A18. Falwell's position fell outside the mainstream of immediate post-9/11 thought, as is evidenced by the fact that so eminent a conservative commentator as William F. Buckley roundly condemned what he called the evangelist's "ignorant misapplication of Christian thought" in the *National Review* a mere five days after Falwell's televised remarks. See "Invoking God's Thunder: On the Reverend Jerry Falwell," *National Review Online*, September 18, 2001; available at <http://www.nationalreview.com/buckley/buckley091801.shtml>. Even the extraordinarily conservative *Washington Times* condemned the remarks: "Shortly after Sept. 11, the Revs. Falwell and Robertson distinguished themselves as the most noxious voices on the right of the American political spectrum"; see Tod Lindberg, "Osama bin Laden, meet Jerry Falwell; Extremism Must Be Defanged," *Washington Times*, October 23, 2001, A19. Falwell was hardly alone in the opinion that the attacks of 9/11 were a judgment from God, however. Outside the major media markets, letters to the editor appeared in smaller papers that supported Falwell. One example is by Amy Bradshaw, a letter writer from Blue Ridge, Virginia: "This was certainly a wake-up call from God. We take God out of our everyday lives. Then when tragedy strikes, we're down on our knees. Maybe if we spent a little more time in prayer before tragedy strikes, there would be a lot less hatred in this world"; see *Roanoke Times & World News*, September 18, 2001, A15.

65. Several years later Milton seems to remember, and make reference to, the hysteria of the mid-1660s in *Of True Religion*: "God, when men sin outrageously, and will not be admonisht, gives over chastising them, perhaps by Pestilence, Fire, Sword, or Famin, which may all turn to their good, and takes up his severest punishments, hardness, besottedness of heart, and Idolatry, to their final perdition" (YP 8:439). In other words, in Milton's view, God punishes sinners, not with natural disasters, but with the *spiritual* effects of their own sins, including—perhaps especially—idolatry, a sin in no short supply among those who create God in their own wrathful images.

66. See, for example, Stevie Davies, *Images of Kingship in "Paradise Lost": Milton's Politics and Christian Liberty* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983).

67. See my *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton's Rejection of God as King* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004).

68. See, for example, William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

69. As in Dennis Danielson, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

70. See Fish, *Surprised by Sin*.