

## **Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton's Irony.**

Victoria Silver

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## **Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism.**

David Loewenstein

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Change is coming to Milton studies—a field which has long been a bastion of conservative scholarship that has carefully rehearsed the ways in which its poet can be aligned with the Augustinian tradition, to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, or the ways in which Milton uses his poetry as a scourge of the reader's "sin," in the readings of Stanley Fish and the innumerable scholars who have been influenced by Fish's *Surprised by Sin*—but that change is coming slowly. What John Rumrich, in his 1996 work *Milton Unbound*, called "the invented Milton" has, it seems, held the field in thrall for decades, as the still widespread condemnation or outright dismissal of William Empson's *Milton's God* continues to demonstrate some 44 years after its first publication. The antipathy toward Empson among American Miltonists reached such dramatic (and in my view absurd) heights that in 1995, when Empson was finally honored by the Milton Society of America, Richard Strier (a provocateur in his own right) acknowledged—without necessarily sharing—that antipathy by titling his address "Crowning the Enemy: Empson and Milton." According to Strier, Empson had forced readers "to take seriously the idea that Milton truly thought that God's ways needed justifying, that this was a hard, not an easy thing to do, and that a case could be made for the other side" (Silver 4).

In recent years, Empson has been making something of a comeback in critical circles, as a newer generation of Milton scholars has been taking a fresh look at a book many of us (myself included) were actually warned away from as undergraduate and graduate students. Despite Empson's

recognition for such books as *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Milton's *God* was excoriated by Miltonists in the United States, and then often dismissed as a credible work. The book went out of print (as opposed to the more "orthodox" work of C.S. Lewis, whose work on *Paradise Lost* from the 1940s remains in print to this day), and survived as a kind of bogeyman: an example of the kind of work *not* to do on this author, in this historical period, and so on. But this has begun changing in the last several years, as a number of scholars are currently either in press with, or in late manuscript stages with, works that are demonstrably influenced by this long-reviled book.

One such scholar is Victoria Silver, whose *Imperfect Sense* caused, as I remember, a good deal of stir amongst American Miltonists when it was first published in 2001. It did so for good reason, as Silver's book is, on balance, a provocative work that is well worth the time and effort to read. Silver very early acknowledges her debt to "William Empson, without whose book I could not proceed" (4), even as she makes an argument that ultimately takes a radically different direction than that taken by the scholar whose book she admires.

Silver's essential point lies in her use of the idea of the "hidden God" in Luther and Calvin as a way of explaining Milton's disturbing portrait of God in *Paradise Lost*. For the Reformers, God is only known as he is for us (experientially), not as he is in himself (ontologically); Milton's "God," according to Silver, should be understood as an attempt to draw an experiential rather than an ontological portrait of a deity who is, strictly speaking, beyond human knowledge and rational categories. For Silver, the common mistake in reading *Paradise Lost* is the "propensity to read God by analogy to the creature," a reading that guarantees both misunderstanding and a readerly sense of alienation from, and accusation by, God (263).

Job—the book and the titular character—figures prominently in Silver's first chapter, and returns near the end of her second chapter. The essential problem of the book of Job—whether God can be known through, explained by, and held accountable to human ideas of justice—is, for Silver, also the central issue of the Reformers' doctrines of justification (the process through which fallen humankind is reconciled to God), and of Milton's portrait of God in *Paradise Lost*. Silver, in returning to the questions of William Empson, takes seriously the idea that God's justice can, even should, be questioned.

In the painstaking theologically and philosophically based arguments that follow (she works most closely with Wittgenstein, Luther, Calvin, and Adorno), Silver makes the case that not only is such questioning central to Milton's epic, but it is also central to Reformation doctrines of justification

and faith. For Silver, Luther, Calvin, and Milton have this central dynamic in common: faith is what enables us to imagine the divine as just despite appearances to the contrary, and justification "lies in imagining [God] to be otherwise than he seems from our experience" (52).

Silver's analysis proceeds to a consideration of the Reformers' emphasis on "the distinction between creator and creation, which we experience as the most profound existential incoherence" (53). She compares Milton's justifying of God's ways to Luther's through this notion of distinction and incoherence: "Sin [tries] to achieve an easy resolution either by denying the distinction [...] or by transcending this boundary between creator and creature and proposing to be like deity itself" (53-4). This, according to Silver, is precisely what Satan does in the epic—he denies the distinction between creator and creature, and imagines "unseen deity to perfect and so ratify his own sense of self as the visible form of God" (54). And this is the irony of Milton and of *Paradise Lost* for Silver: Milton's purpose is "equally to invite and to constrain the reader from Satan's sort of analogy," and ultimately, Milton's point is that what Satan, and readers, encounter "is not the one true God, but an expression of what it can be like to encounter the divine from the vantage of our humanity" (54).

The character of the Father, which Silver describes as "an image we do find impossible, absurd, abominable, diabolical"(54), is drawn by Milton in order to change the way we think about deity, "not to ratify the image of the Father [...] but to separate us from the assumptions that induce this picture and so pervert how we understand deity" (54). Deity would be most truly understood only in those moments when its appearance (as an unjust God, the Father of *Paradise Lost*) is seen as a test of the faith that holds to ideas of a just God it cannot demonstrate by appeal to experience: "God and the things of God like the true and the good are best known in the very moment when our ideas of them cease adequately to encompass our experience" (97).

As a lynchpin of her argument, Silver discusses two kinds of justification. The first kind is the categorical or analogical, which she refers to as "normative," or that which springs from the "civic codes and constraints [that] promulgate the terms in which a person or community can be made 'just' in the sense of conformable" (45), a view which holds that "any dissent from the constituted order is wrong" (45-6) because the constituted order is itself justice. The second kind is the instrumental or revisionary, which admits a distinction between the constituted order and justice (for instance, between "the imperatives of the king and those of truth or the common good" [46]). It is this latter sense of justification—the instrumental or revisionary—that is crucial to Silver's view of Milton's project in *Paradise Lost*, and indeed in

much of his other work. In a discussion of Milton's *Areopagitica*, Silver sums up the dynamics of revisionary justification as a process in which "incoherence or contradiction instructs us to revise our ideas of truth" (104). This last passage can serve nicely as a description of the representations of the divine in *Paradise Lost*—incoherent and contradictory images that instruct readers to revise their ideas of the divine.

One of Silver's most salient points is, or should be, familiar to readers of Derrida and "theory" more generally: there is no one-to-one correspondence between our language(s) and those objects and/or concepts we use language to describe. In her third chapter ("Milton's Text"), Silver brings together Luther, Wittgenstein, and Milton to make this point. Quoting Wittgenstein's observation that we tend, wrongly, to imagine that "proposition, language, thought, world stand in line one behind the other, each equivalent to each" (116), Silver joins this idea to Luther's "exegetical allegory [that] may make the unseen intelligible to us, but not in order to claim any real correspondence between the images it selects and the things of God. For no use of human language [including the language of epic poetry] could possibly resemble the religious reality it is made to convey" (119). In other words, the words, images, and concepts that are used to talk about a hidden God are neither "equivalent" to that God, nor able to "claim any real correspondence" to that God. What they partake in is not God, but what Silver (following Wittgenstein's reading of Luther) calls a "theological grammar," which, like grammar in the descriptive linguistic sense, explains what a word (in this case, "God") is *to* or *for* us. Thus, these words about God, this "theological grammar," tells us about what God is *to* or *for* us, tells us about how we understand and experience the concept of God, and tells us what use we make of that understanding and that concept. Such words do not, however, tell us about the divine itself; they serve, instead, as "'a veil of ignorance' that artificially permits us a relationship and knowledge of religious things otherwise impossible" (119). Scriptural (much less poetic) expressions about God are *not* God, *nor do they capture the essence of God*. What they do is provide a construct through which and against which to think about, relate to, and struggle with that which is ultimately beyond human reason, images, words, and categories.

Thus, the project of justification that Milton announces early in *Paradise Lost* is one Silver would categorize as being of the instrumental, revisionary, and transformative variety. For such justification to work, it must have material to work with, something to revise or transform—and that something, that material, is human thinking about God. For Silver, instances of apparent divine injustice—in the Bible and in Milton's poetry—serve to effect change in human thought: "injustice or human suffering precipitates a shift from

old understandings to new" (120). What is implied by the shift from old to new is a shift away from ideas of a one-to-one correspondence between words about God and the hidden, unknowable divine to which they merely point; a shift away from ideas of a real correspondence between "images" and "the things of God." It is a shift away from reductive, object-based interpretation of words about God:

In succumbing to this interpretation of deity and truth, we have reduced ourselves and the world to the bodies we can see and touch, the only kind of existence we recognize. However, when faith reintroduces the unknowable God and the whole order of invidious things his presence implicates, we cease to be enthralled, to suffer the gross indignities and limitations of our self-imposed servitude to the merely obvious or habitual sense we assign our experience. (120)

That idea—that reductive, creature-bound interpretations of God serve also as reductive and imprisoning interpretations of the world and the self that inhabits that world—is key to Silver's analysis of *Paradise Lost*, especially of Satan's, Adam's, and Eve's interpretations and actions. It is not only Satan who carries "Hell" (or a prison) with him and inside him—it is also the character, or reader, who fails to see (as did Job initially) that apparent divine injustice is a call to "shift from old understandings to new."

In her fifth and sixth chapters, Silver traces the ways in which the narratives of Satan, Adam, and Eve reflect a refusal, or an inability, to make the all-important conceptual shift that is required in order to escape creature-bound views of the divine. Satan's predicament, for example, is that he and the Father "value the entire order of events—from the Son's exaltation to the fall of humanity—in entirely incompatible ways," and "each figure conceives [Satan's fall] as a categorical betrayal" (201). The fundamental problem for readers of *Paradise Lost*, says Silver, "lies in appreciating that difference [between creator and creature], since it involves a particular nuance [...] irony, in other words" (202). The irony of Satan's misunderstanding is also reflected, for Silver, in the hesitancy of the narrative speaker about the invocation in Book 3. The speaker "fear[s] deception, not only by desire and mortality, but also by his God" (205), a fear of deception which stems from the experience of the vast gulf between creator and created, from the sense (illustrated by Eve's lending credence to the arguments of the serpent in Book 9) that "even in a state of grace without sin, deity's ordinances can appear outrageous to us" (206). And it is from this position, which Silver refers to as "the position of felt injustice and suffering" (205), from which Milton's narrator speaks and from which the great epic attempts to "assert Eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to Men."

It is in order to establish and enhance this sense of "felt injustice and suf-

fering," according to Silver, that Milton starts *Paradise Lost* with Satan. And it is in order to emphasize the necessity to engage in the difficult project of shifting from old understandings to new, that Milton takes readers through Satan's failure to make this shift, and Adam's and Eve's initial failure, passionate struggle, and final (if tentative) success in achieving a new understanding before they take their "solitary" walk from Eden into the world at the end of *Paradise Lost*.

Silver has written an important book, one that Miltonists, and others interested in Early Modern theology, and the larger issues of representation and the limits of language should read with the care her work demands. However, it is not a work about which I am left without questions and reservations. Her analytical frame is manifestly—even relentlessly—grounded in the theology of Luther. That, in and of itself, is not a problem (in fact, it is often one of the strengths of the book), but it does lead to certain oft-repeated assertions that raise questions. To take one prominent example, the frequently reinforced point that "[c]reation does not descend from deity in the manner of an emanation scheme: it is made by divine fiat, not metaphysical or material engendering" (232) seems inimical to the idea of creation *de deo* that appears in both *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana* (which Silver assumes, without comment, is Milton's). Additionally, in a work that argues vigorously for a distinction between things seen and *res non apparentes* (things not apparent), it seems odd that a very particular conception of such unapparent things (the Lutheran concept of the "hidden God," rather than, for example, a more Neoplatonic concept—the "God beyond God" of Pseudo-Dionysius and/or Nicholas of Cusa) is being presented as *the only* way to conceive of what is, after all, not apparent.

My primary reservation about this otherwise excellent book, however, is more basic. The prose, though it generally remains clear, too often slips into near obfuscation or the appearance of having lost control of its structure and imagery. As an example, in a discussion of the character of Satan, Silver offers the following:

So personified evil has the status of a trope in Milton's religious thought as well as his poem, with the devil's promiscuous exfoliation in the demonology of *Paradise Lost* observing the ironic decorum that Milton ascribes to *res non apparentes*. (221)

In the context of a section making use of the now familiar (wearingly familiar, to this reader) argument about the progressive change (or degradation) the character of Satan undergoes in the poem, the phrase "promiscuous exfoliation" can be coaxed into what I gather is Silver's intended meaning. Of course, many—though by no means all—readers will be aware of the sense of "peeling away layers" in the word "exfoliate." But am I to pretend,

decorously, that the first image that pops into my head with the phrase "the devil's promiscuous exfoliation" is *not* something that involves the Prince of Darkness's intimate skin-care regimen? That example is one I found merely amusing, but my more serious reaction to the language and prose of this book is that it is—occasionally, but too often—a weight that threatens to drag the provocative and important points of the book down with it. I am left with a sense of *too-muchness* about the book, at the chapter, paragraph, and even sentence levels, and like Dr. Johnson with *Paradise Lost* itself, I most certainly do not wish *Imperfect Sense* any longer than it is.

But these are mere frustrations with what is, all in all, an important work, one that I strongly hope will be *read* (not merely skimmed or *read in*), and become a central contributor to current and future debates in Milton studies.

The change in Milton studies is not, of course, always overtly influenced by the work of William Empson. Another notable trend in Milton scholarship today is the recovery of radical mid-seventeenth-century Protestantism as a context within which Milton's works can be understood. David Loewenstein's *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries* is an example of what can be achieved by resituating Milton, and his works, in this rich and suggestive milieu.

Loewenstein's book reads, at times, like two books. Split into two parts, its first half deals with such figures as John Lillburne, Gerrard Winstanley, Abiezer Coppe, Anna Trapnel, George Fox, and Andrew Marvell. The second half of the book analyzes Milton's great works—*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*—in terms of the framework and context that Loewenstein has carefully provided in the book's first section.

*Paradise Lost* is analyzed through a focus on the character of Satan, and his skillfully duplicitous use of revolutionary, "godly" rhetoric. Satan "easily manipulates opposing kinds of political rhetoric, sometimes within the very same speech" (204), demonstrating this Machiavellian virtuosity through an ability at one moment to "sound like an antimonarchical revolutionary or heretic who rejects the laws of God, but at another like a royalist apologist or conservative Puritan like William Prynne" (205). Satan, in his grand speeches of the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, often sounds "much like the fiercely antimonarchical Milton" himself (205). In Loewenstein's analysis, Milton's Satan becomes a wonderful illustration of contemporary anxieties over the uses and misuses of revolutionary language, as well as a warning about the powerful men from whose mouths such language often sounds:

for Leveller writers it was Cromwell—"the pretended false Saint Oliver"—along with his fellow military grandees, who most alarmingly possessed this notorious

ability to simulate a godly discourse masking underneath conservative convictions, Machiavellian designs, and ruthless ambition. (204—5)

Loewenstein contrasts Satan's unsettling rhetorical skill with Abdiel's bluntness, arguing that the "sharp exchange between Abdiel and Satan is [...] couched in the specific and volatile language of mid-seventeenth-century dissent and sectarianism" (235). In Loewenstein's treatment, Abdiel comes into focus as a John Lillburne-like character, one who "embodies, in a forceful and imaginative way, the fierce nonconformist who has endured the highly charged slander of sedition [...] and chooses to fight back" (237). The two angels, the fallen and unfallen, thus appear as representations and encapsulations of larger political and discursive trends operant in Milton's own experience of politics and the wars to which political disputes so often lead us. But Loewenstein gives a special emphasis in this chapter to the manifold ways in which so-called revolutionary language is co-opted for counterrevolutionary purposes.

Loewenstein's treatment of *Paradise Regained*, an expansion and reworking of his earlier, seminal article on the same subject, focuses on the politics, theology, and rhetoric of internality as it appears both in radical Protestant discourse and in Milton's brief epic. Loewenstein is concerned to highlight the conflict and argumentative engagement of the Son in *Paradise Regained*, distancing his interpretation from those whose analysis of "the great poems reveal a Milton who has largely withdrawn from politics into faith" (251). For Loewenstein, the "meek, calm yet sharply polemical Jesus of *Paradise Regained*" (266) is a highly contentious political figure, one for whom "interiority and politics are realigned" (257) as complements, rather than opposites. *Paradise Regained*, in Loewenstein's view, pictures its Jesus in the manner of "Quaker writing," as an "inward-looking saint enduring great opposition and trials and yet remaining, almost in a superhuman fashion, firm and unmoved" (260). An important motif that *Paradise Regained* shares with radical Protestant writings is the idea of "mighty weakness," a particularly powerful idea in a time and place "when radical religious prophets, leaders, and writers were [...] depicted [...] as both mighty and humble, meek and forceful" (252). Milton's Jesus in *Paradise Regained* finally illustrates the patience, strength, and obscurity of those "radical religious saints who found themselves exercised in an age of acute trials and uncertainty," but nonetheless had the patience and faith to "wait upon God in the wilderness, even as they may have anxiously wondered, 'Where will this end?'" (268).

It is in taking on *Samson Agonistes*, however, where Loewenstein's book, and its emphasis on the radical religious contexts of Milton's day, becomes most stimulating—both to agreement and disagreement—and potentially



most productive of further conversation and investigation. Loewenstein argues—in a chapter written before the events of September 11, 2001 (and before the controversy between John Carey and Stanley Fish that played out in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* a year later)—that Samson is a disturbing, but credible illustration of "the radical saint in a state of anguish and crisis" (269):

Milton's is an unsettling drama [...] about the mightiness of the Spirit of God which comes upon the militant saint yet once more and prompts him to commit a spectacular act of "horrid" destruction (1542). (270)

Loewenstein's analysis takes as an axiomatic proposition that Milton's Samson actually *does* receive an inner prompting from a God that neither speaks nor appears anywhere in the poem—unlike the God figures who play active roles in both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Loewenstein grounds his contention, as he has painstakingly grounded all his arguments in this book, in the context of radical religious writings: "[f]or radical religious writers, Samson being moved inwardly by the Lord's Spirit could signal the operation of an awesome conquering power of divine origin, as it did for the Independent minister and Fifth Monarchist preacher John Canne" (276). Milton's poem gives, "dramatic expression to the notion voiced by the regicide and Anabaptist William Goffe [...]: 'Now the work of the Spirit is, that we do pull down all works [that are not] of the Spirit whatsoever'" (276). Samson's act of vengeance is placed alongside the themes of revenge in the writings of the "godly" of the seventeenth century. In the words of George Fox, "A day of vengeance is coming upon you all; that the Lord will be recompensed upon you all his adversaries" (281). Loewenstein goes on to observe that radical Puritan readers in Milton's time "could compare Samson's act of destruction against the Philistines to the Lord's desolation of worldly powers in their own age" (281). Finally, for Loewenstein, Samson is analyzed as "the militant, faithful champion of God [who] embodies Milton's unsettling vision of a radical saint who [follows] the impromptu motions of the Spirit" (291).

*Representing Revolution* is a rich and rewarding work, a book that will repay careful and repeated readings, and one whose vision of Milton in the context of the radicals of his time will, I believe, provide the impetus for further questions and investigations into the *unorthodox* and *unsettled* qualities in Milton's thought and works. Interestingly, in his discussion of *Paradise Regained*, Loewenstein remarks that "no critical consensus has emerged" in the readings thereof. Despite questions I am left with after reading Loewenstein's work on *Samson Agonistes* (why, for instance, should we take for granted that Samson actually *does* receive his "intimate impulse" [l. 223] from a God

whose only existence seems to be in the mouths of otherwise less than fully informed characters?), I think the enduring value of works like *Representing Revolution* and *Imperfect Sense* is the role that each will play in challenging the "critical consensus" that for decades prevailed in Milton studies (now opening, slowly, but with the greatest reluctance, to new perspectives, ideas, and approaches). Critical consensus, all too often, leads to an avalanche of "me too" works—books and articles that rake over and over the same bare patch of ground, rehearsing and (minimally, if at all) "extending" the works of those earlier and more influential writers who set the terms of the consensus within which others work. Perhaps that is a state of affairs that recurs periodically, and perhaps these days of new questions and approaches in Milton studies will once again settle into the long quiescence of a newly stultifying "critical consensus." If that is so, I can only hope that those days of a new consensus are yet far off, and that in the meantime many more energetic, contentious, and intelligent works will be published, and actually read by scholars, teachers, students, and general readers for whom *Paradise Lost* and its contexts remain objects of fascination and study.

*Michael Bryson*  
*California State University, Northridge*