

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-01922-5 - The New Milton Criticism
 Edited by Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer
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Introduction: Paradigms lost, paradigms found: the New Milton Criticism

Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer

“Conflict, ambivalence, and open-endedness” occupy a contested place in Milton studies.¹ While discontinuities in Milton’s works have long been noted, Miltonists have traditionally regarded them as anomalies, and the critics who opted to explore, without resolving, them were often designated as marginal, or outliers in the field. The predilection for coherence and resolution in Milton studies has led Nigel Smith to observe that “the nature and complexity of [Milton’s] contradictory energy is not appreciated, even by Milton specialists.”² *The New Milton Criticism* seeks to provide and encourage the appreciation Smith calls for. The chapters assembled here interrogate various paradigms of certainty that have characterized many contributions to the field. This book also intends to show through a variety of approaches how analyses of Milton’s irresolvable complexities can enrich our understanding of his writings. To be sure, as Paul Stevens recognizes, “there is a degree to which almost all Milton criticism tends to imagine itself, at some point, as the New Milton Criticism.”³ We hope, however, to earn this label by showcasing a Milton criticism resistant to reading Milton into coherence, a criticism that treats his work – *Paradise Lost* especially but not exclusively – as conflicted rather than serene, and that explicitly highlights the spirit of critical inquiry in Milton’s writing.⁴

Interpretations of the Pilot metaphor in the first epic simile demonstrate how paradigms of certitude and a will to order have traditionally shaped criticism on *Paradise Lost*. In attempting to describe Satan’s size to the reader, the Muse declares that the fallen angel is as huge as:

Some material in this Introduction first appeared in Peter C. Herman, “Paradigms Lost, Paradigms Found: The New Milton Criticism,” *Literature Compass* 2 (2005). Article first published online December 21, 2005, DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2005.00176.x. We are greatly indebted to Richard Strier for his astute, corrective, and supportive remarks on the present chapter.

that Sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
 Created hugest that swim th' Ocean stream:
 Him haply slumbring on the *Norway* foam
 The Pilot of some small night-founder'd Skiff,
 Deeming some Island, oft, as Sea-men tell,
 With fixed Anchor in his skaly rind
 Moors by his side under the Lee, while Night
 Invests the Sea, and wished Morn delays:
 So stretcht out huge in length the Arch-fiend lay.
 (1.200–9)

Crucially, Milton defies expectation and his various sources by *not* supplying the anticipated or traditional conclusion.⁵ In fact, he leaves the episode unresolved, with the Pilot stranded on the whale “while Night / Invests the Sea, and wished Morn delays” (1.207–8). Most readers assume that the whale dives and takes the Pilot with him, even though Milton’s verses provide no such evidence. According to Roland M. Frye, “Just as Leviathan lured seamen to anchor on the seeming security of his great bulk, only then to plunge to the bottom of the sea and destroy them, so Satan had already lured his angelic followers to Hell and would so lure many deceived men and women in future ages.”⁶ Roy Flannagan notes that “‘Leviathan’ became synonymous with Satan, and the story of mariners anchoring on his back only to be swept under to their death was as popular as the similar Will-o’-the-Wisp or *ignis fatuus* story.”⁷ Bryan Adams Hampton predicts that the mariner “has unwittingly abandoned hope for returning home, finding rest, or simply surviving – a terrifying realization *he will have all too soon* when he finds himself lurching and plunging at the whims of the great creature” (emphasis added).⁸

Even when critics recognize that the story is not finished, they incline toward providing an expected ending. Christopher Grose, for example, concedes that “Milton omits the conclusion – at least it is not rehearsed,” but then adds, “the ending, like the meaning of the simile, is hardly in doubt.”⁹ Linda Gregerson likewise decides that the morning “will presumably disclose to the pilot his doom.”¹⁰ Though Milton leaves the Pilot’s fate unclear, critics almost uniformly impose a closure that the passage itself resists, and thus miss opportunities afforded by Milton’s invitation to a multivalent and open-ended reading. By deliberately withholding the conventional ending, is Milton creating a moment when the reader, suddenly faced with a passage that defies expectation, must re-assess the possible significances of the passage? What might be the relations between

this simile and the other epic figures and devices that end in a similarly suspended fashion, such as the Plowman who “doubting stands” (4.983), unsure of how his harvest will turn out? William Kerrigan, who is among the few who are sensitive to the open-endedness of the Pilot simile, suggests that the “ominous lack of closure in this story” represents the “excess and uncertainty” of poetry, which allows Milton “to outwit as well as absorb philosophy.”¹¹ Others will arrive at their own conclusions, but our point is that by not supplying the ending Milton leaves out, we invite a richer set of interpretations in much the same way that Shakespearians now approach *Measure for Measure*:

Critical efforts to exorcise the play’s demons, to disregard Shakespeare’s illumination of the darker regions of the soul, in effect deny the play one of its boldest claims to truth. And to impose any external ... solutions ... is, in fact, to deny this play its rightful claims to greatness. Finally, it seems impertinent to consider it the duty of criticism to solve the problems that Shakespeare himself refused to solve. What remains pertinent are the problems posed.¹²

Similarly, the New Milton Criticism encourages criticism that does not solve the problems that Milton himself resists solving.

I: EARLY MILTON CRITICISM

The paradigm of imposing certainty on an unruly Miltonic text could be said to have started with the addition of Andrew Marvell’s poem, “On *Paradise Lost*,” to the second edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674). Faced with the vastness of the subject and the poet’s nerve (“I behold the Poet blind, yet bold” [1]), Marvell, like another early reader of the poem, Sir John Hobart,¹³ feared that Milton, embittered by the loss of his sight and likely also by the failure of his revolutionary hopes, would do something terrible:

... the Argument
 Held me a while misdoubting his Intent,
 That he would ruine (for I saw him strong)
 The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song
 (So *Sampson* groap’d the Temples Posts in spight)
 The World o’rwhelming to revenge his sight.
 (ll. 5–10)

In the opening stanza of this encomium, Marvell registers uncertainty about the poet’s intentions and perhaps also his overreaching: “the Argument / Held me *a while* misdoubting his Intent” (ll. 5–6; emphasis

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added). Would Milton's overweening strength "ruine ... / The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song" (ll. 7–8)? The Samson image that follows remains deeply resonant and deeply troubling – "(So *Sampson* groap'd the Temples Posts in spight) / The World o'erwhelming to revenge his sight" (ll. 9–10). Is the poem a hymn of resentment? Initially unsettled by what David Norbrook aptly characterizes as "the aggressive, iconoclastic aims of Milton's epic, which run counter to the patriotic harmony the conservative reader might ask for," Marvell's speaker realizes that his worries over the poem's impulses are unfounded, for they are "more creative than destructive."¹⁴ Moreover, nothing in this poem violates decorum, as Marvell later determines: "Thou hast not miss'd one thought that could be fit, / *And all that was improper dost omit*" (ll. 27–8; emphasis added). Though Marvell's fears about the ruining of "sacred Truths" are allegedly allayed, assurance does not overwrite his earlier anxieties. Late in Marvell's poem, *Paradise Lost* still seems to present a sense of real danger to "sacred Truths" and a sacred inner core. At line 34, one notes the strange and strong word "inviolat" set off by stops. The threat of Milton's "strength" lingers. The very fact that Marvell rehearsed such concerns suggests, along with his endorsement of Milton's versification as a vehicle for liberty and rebellion, that this poem will not necessarily repeat or endorse pieties. At the end of the century, in 1699, Milton's biographer John Toland felt compelled to defend his subject against the proliferating charges of "Heresy and Impiety."¹⁵ Faced with a poem that challenges convention and defies a definitive interpretation, some of Milton's Restoration readers and editors would do some fitting or omitting of their own.

In *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man: An Opera Written in Heroique Verse* (1677), for example, John Dryden openly rewrites Milton's epic.¹⁶ As he states in prefatory remarks, "The Authors Apology for Heroique Poetry; and Poetique Licence," "I cannot without injury to the deceas'd Author of *Paradise Lost*, but acknowledge that this POEM has receiv'd its entire Foundation, part of the Design, and many of the Ornaments, from him" (sig. B1r). Despite Marvell's assurances of the poem's observance of decorum, *Paradise Lost* evidently did not sit well with a Restoration audience, and Nathaniel Lee, in his prefatory poem, "To Mr. DRYDEN, on his POEM of PARADICE," suggests some of the reasons why John Dryden would feel compelled to revise Milton's masterwork: "For *Milton* did the Wealthy Mine disclose, / And rudely cast what you could well dispose: / He roughly drew, on an old fashion'd ground, / A Chaos, for no perfect World was found, / Till through the

heap, your mighty Genius shin'd; / His was the Golden Ore which you refin'd" (sig. A4r).

But in refining, as it were, the ore, Dryden highlights those parts of Milton's text that he finds unsettling. For example, at the end of Book 3, Milton has Satan transform himself into a cherub, and in this disguise, he suborns Uriel, "The sharpest sighted Spirit of all in Heav'n" (3.691), into revealing the location of Eden: "So spake the false dissembler unperceiv'd; / For neither Man nor Angel can discern / Hypocrisie ..." (3.681–3). This passage creates all sorts of problems, not the least being: if Satan can so easily delude the "sharpest sighted Spirit," what chance do Adam and Eve have? Dryden, however, rewrites *Paradise Lost* so as to restore certainty and resolve the problem. In his version, Uriel tells Satan the location, but the angel immediately suspects that something is amiss:

Not unobserv'd thou goest, who e'r thou art;
 Whether some Spirit, on Holy purpose bent,
 Or some fall'n Angel from below broke loose,
 Who com'st with envious eyes, and curst intent,
 To view this World, and its created Lord:
(sig. C3v)

Dryden deals similarly with the problem of Milton's God, a character who has disturbed many readers and continues to do so to this day, as the essays in Part I of this volume discuss in some detail. In the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope complained that "God the Father turns a school-divine,"¹⁷ and the controversy continues, the most famous example being William Empson's *Milton's God*, in which he accuses the Christian deity in *Paradise Lost* and elsewhere of resembling Stalin.¹⁸ Dryden proceeds to eliminate God entirely from his rhymed rewriting of Milton's epic, thus stabilizing potentially subversive aspects of the text. Dryden's strategy throughout this poem, as Joseph A. Wittreich writes, is "to cancel out Miltonic ambiguity,"¹⁹ to restore the poem to certainty.

Related efforts to address misgivings about the poem mark eighteenth-century criticism. John Dennis's defense in the 1720s of Milton against the aspersions of George Sewell exemplifies the desire for aesthetic integrity or "justness" in his reading of *Paradise Lost*, and specifically in the depiction of the epic machinery and the ontology of the angels. "Most of the Machines ... have the appearance of something that is inconsistent and contradictory, for in them the Poet seems to confound Body and Mind, Spirit and Matter," is Sewell's objection. Dennis judges the human, corporeal nature of the angels and demons as more "delightful" and as enabling "more clear and distinct Ideas of them." Milton's own rendering of the angels,

Dennis maintains, follows that of Cowley and Tasso, whose “Descriptions of those fall’n Angels [are devoid of] any real Contradiction,” and further, they have taken “the trouble of shewing, that what is thought to be a real Contradiction, has but the false Appearance of one.”²⁰

The seeming debate between Richard Bentley and Zachary Pearce in the 1730s offers more telling examples of the compulsion to stabilize the poem. The debate, however, is “seeming” because the two are not as opposed as they initially might appear. As William Empson first noted,²¹ the impetus to make *Paradise Lost* conform to preconceived notions of religious orthodoxy underlies Richard Bentley’s infamous theory that, “Some acquaintance of our Poet’s, entrusted with his Copy, took strange Liberties with it, unknown to the blind Author ...” (sig. B1r),²² and Bentley’s edition occasioned furious opposition, the most famous example being Pearce’s thorough *Review of the Text of Milton’s “Paradise Lost”* (1732–3). Pearce’s *modus operandi* is instructive, for he always explains how the moments Bentley objects to as unconventional or contradictory are, if only “properly” understood, perfectly traditional. Thus, the two agree on what *Paradise Lost* should be, but whereas Bentley judges that Milton’s poem needs to be purged of supposedly interpolated passages that compromise its integrity, Pearce concludes that *Paradise Lost* is for the most part intact and already perfectly acceptable. Both maintain that the poem should be absolutely consistent and contain no contradictions.

For example, Bentley mightily objected to the metaphors in *Paradise Lost* on the grounds of incongruity. At the end of Book 4, Milton uses an epic simile to illustrate the confrontation between Satan and his enemies, namely Gabriel, Ithuriel, Zephon, and the remainder of the angelic squadron:

While thus he spake, th’ Angelic Squadron bright
 Turn’d fierie red, sharpning in mooned hornes
 Thir Phalanx, and began to hemm him round
 With ported Spears, as thick as when a field
 Of Ceres ripe for harvest waving bends
 Her bearded Grove of ears, which way the wind
 Swayes them; the careful Plowman doubting stands
 Least on the threshing floore his hopeful sheaves
 Prove chaff.

(4.977–85)

Bentley senses two problems here. First, the simile troubles him by portending the defeat of the angels, since Milton compares their spears to wheat ripe for the harvest. Second, the plowman who “doubting stands,”

wondering whether he has wheat or chaff, introduces incertitude. Both are anathema to Bentley. In order to eliminate the introduction of doubt, Bentley brackets “the Careful Plowman ...” in the text of his edition, and suggests that this phrase be eliminated: “Join the two pieces of Verse together: *Which way the Wind / Sways them. On the other side Satan alarmed*” (sig. T4r). Because the Plowman clause introduces doubt, the lines could not, in Bentley’s view, have been written by Milton: “The pragmatistical Editor inserted the Two between; which clearly betray whose Manufacture they are” (sig. T4r). As for the rest of the simile, Bentley huffs: “What are sheaves bound up in a Barn to the Phalanx, that hem’d Satan? Where’s the least Similitude? Besides to suppose a *Storm* in the Field of Corn, implies that the Angels were in a ruffle and hurry about *Satan*, not in regular and military Order” (sig. T4r). But Pearce counters that Milton’s similes and epic comparisons only *seem* problematic: “that here is no Contradiction at all; for *Milton* in his similitudes (as is the practice of *Homer* and *Virgil* too), after he has shew’d the common resemblance, often takes the liberty of wandering into some unressembling Circumstances” (sig. F2v-r). Pearce rebuts Bentley’s accusation of impropriety in two ways. First, he emphasizes how Milton’s technique is not novel, but entirely traditional (“as is the practice of *Homer* and *Vergil*”). Second, Pearce defuses the problem of doubt by dismissing these lines as a mere flight of fancy, of no thematic import whatsoever: Milton “often takes the liberty of wandering into some unressembling Circumstances: which have no other relation to the Comparison.” Pearce preserves orthodoxy by refusing to grant that these lines carry any weight at all.

In his edition of *Paradise Lost*, Bentley frequently highlighted instances where he decided that Milton contradicted himself, and as Empson pointed out, thus became an invaluable guide to the many problems in *Paradise Lost*. The fact that he regarded these problems as corruptions is less important “than the fact that he saw them at all.”²³ In a sense, it is Pearce who establishes the paradigm for later criticism by continuously resolving the contradiction, as he does in the quotation above (“here is no Contradiction at all”). When Bentley objected to the famous oxymoron, “darkness visible” (l.63) because the phrase constitutes “a flat Contradiction” (sig. B3v), Pearce responds: “I cannot agree with him: *M.* seems to have us’d these words to signify *Gloom*: Absolute darkness is strictly speaking invisible; but where there is a *Gloom* only, there is so much *Light* remaining as serves to shew that there are objects, and yet that those Objects cannot be distinctly seen” (sig. B5r). Note that both deny the possibility of contradiction in Milton.

II: CONTEMPORARY MILTON CRITICISM

One could attribute these interpretive gyrations to the influence of neo-classicism, dismissing Dryden, Bentley, and Pearce as representatives of the same literary culture that embraced Nahum Tate's revival "with alterations" of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1681), except that one finds similar assumptions governing some of the best Milton criticism throughout later centuries. Christopher Ricks's study of Milton's similes in his remarkable and still deeply influential *Milton's Grand Style* provides a case in point.²⁴ Generally, Ricks successfully demonstrates that Milton composed verse as subtle as any New Critic could wish, despite the attacks of F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, but when he comes to Milton's troublesome similes, Ricks draws the same conclusions as Pearce. Faced with the Plowman simile, Ricks notes that Bentley left out these lines, and he has the benefit, as obviously Bentley did not, of Empson's brilliantly iconoclastic reading of this simile as demonstrating that the poem constitutes an attack on God and a celebration of Satan's rebellion. Ricks grants that Empson has a point: "[The simile] certainly makes the angels look weak. If God the sower is the ploughman, then he is anxious; another hint that he is not omnipotent. If the laboring Satan is the ploughman he is only anxious for a moment, and he is the natural ruler or owner of the good angels."²⁵ Consequently, Ricks is faced with a doubly difficult task, as he must defend Milton's verse against the combined forces of the anti-Miltonists, who charge Milton with writing bad verse, and Empson, who reveals Milton's religious and poetic unorthodoxy. Ricks responds by neatly rehearsing Pearce's rebuttal of Bentley. Just as the earlier critic defended Milton's conventionality by aestheticizing the similes and evacuating them of all meaning – Milton "often takes the liberty of wandering into some unresembling Circumstances: which have no other relation to the Comparison, than that it gave him the Hint, and (as it were) set fire to the train of his Imagination" (sig. F2r–v) – so does Ricks determine that "Mr. Empson is jubilant, since this allows him either way to make the poem pro-Satan and anti-God. But it seems more likely that here we do have one of the epic similes, beautiful but digressive."²⁶ Both Pearce and Ricks defuse the problem by emptying the simile of any thematic significance.²⁷

For other twentieth-century Miltonists, the problem of the narrator, or narrators, poses similar difficulties. In her influential study on narrative voice, which she distinguishes from the poet himself, Anne D. Ferry argues that "[t]hroughout *Paradise Lost* we find statements by the narrator which at least in part contradict the impression made immediately upon

us by the actions or speeches of the characters. These apparent contradictions must of course be explained, if we are to be satisfied with our reading of the poem.” Ferry judges that a satisfying reading experience demands the presence of a univocal, ubiquitous narrator who successfully conveys an “impression of conscious control, deliberate artistry, and carefully articulated method.”²⁸ Louis Martz, and, in the following decades, William Riggs, Arnold Stein, and John Guillory subscribe to a view of the narrator as authoritative, or as Stanley Fish later puts it, “a natural ally against the difficulties of the poem.”²⁹ J. Martin Evans opts for Riggs’s identification of the narrator with Milton as author by eliding the distinctions between them while also announcing that the narrator is “not a single euphonious instrument but a chorus of individual and sometimes discordant voices.”³⁰ The criticism we are advancing here invites the interrogation of questions like narrative authority by, as Joseph A. Wittreich states in his Afterword, “reach[ing] beyond the narrator’s voice to narrative voices, and then to the questions of whether some are privileged and, more challengingly, to an assessment of the relative reliability of those often competing voices.” In the case of *Paradise Lost*, the multiple, often irreconcilable, narrative perspectives are among the features that prevent the poem from adding up to one monumental whole.

Balachandra Rajan identified the commitment to coherence made by various Milton scholars, initially including himself, as a “unifying imperative.”³¹ Among the examples thereof that appear in seminal works of Milton scholarship is Diane Kelsey McColley’s integrationist, regenerationist defense of Eve, a character she rescues from “a reductive critical tradition,” as Milton himself is said to have redeemed Eve “from a reductive literary and iconographic tradition.”³² In the same year in which *Milton’s Eve* appeared, Barbara Lewalski published the results of her pioneering analysis of the multiple genres of *Paradise Lost* as exemplifying the poem’s capacity to blend multiplicity into unity.³³ The synthesis of the heterogeneous becomes the order of the day. In a later essay, Lewalski again reminded us that the “generic paradigms” of the poem are multiple, consisting of the heroic genres, the epic-of-wrath, the quest epic, the romance, tragedy, and others. The successful assimilation of the genres into a unified whole constitutes the multi-genre epic, which, she points out, is not marked by “the indeterminacy and inconclusiveness” that Russian genre-theorist Mikhail Bakhtin associates with early modern and later prose narratives.³⁴ One also sees some evidence of a “unifying imperative” in Gordon Teskey’s prize-winning *Delirious Milton* (2006). At first, Teskey argues that “Milton’s creative power is drawn from a rift at the

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center of his consciousness over the question of Creation itself, forcing him to oscillate between two incompatible perspectives, at once affirming and denying the presence of spirit in what he creates.”³⁵ But later in the book, instances of the predilection for certainty appear in the form of Teskey’s proposition that “dissonances become harmonies,” and in the statement that “[t]he very difficulty of imagining such diverse works as Milton wrote composing a unity *impels us to seek that unity on a higher plane*” (emphasis added).³⁶

In various cases, the gravitational pull toward unification in Milton studies is complemented by a methodological prudence in the scholarship, partly evident in the limited impact theoretical developments have had on the field. Post-structuralism, for example, did not gain many adherents among Miltonists, though it did produce Nyquist and Ferguson’s landmark anthology, *Re-membering Milton*, which explicitly criticized Milton scholarship “for its comparative indifference to the theoretical literature and debates” of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁷ A few critics, including Herman Rapaport, Catherine Belsey, and Jonathan Goldberg applied their understanding of deconstruction to Milton, but this approach did not gain many followers.³⁸ The New Milton Criticism follows in the wake of the deconstructionist concern to explore textual moments of contradiction and ambivalence. The central difference is that the New Milton Criticism tends not to take its inspiration from French theory or philosophy, but from close readings of Milton’s texts and from critical and theoretical evaluations of the interpretive histories of those texts.

Locating Milton in relation to historical, religious, and political contexts came naturally for many Miltonists after and even during the reign of the New Criticism, if one considers, for example, A. S. P. Woodhouse and Arthur Barker. The New Historicist movement, however, failed to make a significant impression on Milton studies.³⁹ Stanley Fish dismissed what he called “the New or Newer Historicism” on the grounds of its supposed incoherence: “Historicism ... is embarrassed because it refuses to do the work and indeed doesn’t even know what its work *is*,” and gleefully announced that the failure of post-structuralism and New Historicism does not matter because “the layered richness of Milton criticism ... continues to propel it forward no matter what the deficiencies of various new methods and nonmethods.”⁴⁰ Needless to say, we disagree with Fish’s blanket dismissal, though it is apparent that New Historicist theories of power, authorship, and theories about the effect of literature on historical change have not been enthusiastically embraced.⁴¹ Miltonists’ discontents with the movement gave rise instead