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## INTRODUCTION



## I

They themselves decreed  
 Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,  
 Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,  
 Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.  
 So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,  
 Or aught by me immutably foreseen,  
 They trespass, Authors to themselves in all  
 Both what they judge and what they choose; for so  
 I form'd them free, and free they must remain,  
 Till they enthrall themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The fate of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* is at once divinely foreknown and historically contingent. As “authors to themselves,” they write their own life histories with the actions they freely chose to take, and without interference from the Father’s foreknowledge of the as yet unwritten chapters. Why should Milton choose the metaphor of authorship to represent the freedom within providence enjoyed by the first parents? It shall be my contention that we may take this metaphoric association of authoring and acting within time very seriously, drawing out its implications until they form a *modus operandi* for the reading of *Paradise Lost*.

The word “author” is used variously to refer to authority, creator, and writer in the late seventeenth century. The different meanings accruing to it are all related through its Latin antecedents: *actor*

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(writer, progenitor), derived from *auctus* (magnified), the past participial of *augere* (to increase).<sup>2</sup> When Milton has God, the Father, say that Adam and Eve are "authors to themselves," he clearly means that they have authority over their own destinies. But the form that this authority takes is the ability to determine the narrative of their lives by judging and choosing. They have the authority of authors, that is, of writers, and they will augment or magnify the life histories they write as they accumulate experiences. As progenitors of the human race, they will similarly magnify human history by augmenting, magnifying, authoring a "race of worshippers" (VII.630). By becoming progenitors they will augment God's authority and their own. Created "in the Image of God / Express" (VII.527–8), they will "be fruitful, multiply, and fill the Earth, / Subdue it, and throughout Dominion hold" (VII.531–2). As my argument develops it will become clear that Milton's text activates the varied aspects of authorship, integrating and articulating authority and augmentation through the analogy of writing a narrative and living a life. The shared authorship and authority of God and man requires of Adam and Eve an intricate reading of human action and divine revelation, issuing in a collaboration of history and providence. I shall further argue that the projection of this collaboration as a relationship of accumulation to experience and authority is conditioned by the material social relations characteristic of the late seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

It is in the nature of metaphor in general to join two signifiers in mutual reference and of the metaphor of self-authorship in particular to project tenor and vehicle as two sides of the same phenomenon as seen from two temporally opposed points of view: that of the author who stands within the story he or she writes and who constructs each episode out of the judgments and choices he or she makes, and that of the reader who follows a familiar story, assigning significance to each episode by relating it to his or her conception of the plot as a whole.<sup>4</sup> The analogy of action to text implied by Milton's metaphor suggests that there is an underlying structure common to the foundation of the self through action in the world and of character through plot in fiction. Beyond the suggestion that morally responsible human beings author themselves, as poets (for example) author texts, is the peculiar relationship of

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Adam and Eve's life history to the always already-written text of divine providence. I shall argue that the rhetorical structure of *Paradise Lost* performs a dialectical reversal of the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor of authorship so that providence becomes the author, and the free creature the reader of his or her own life story. This rhetorical reversal at once defines and represents Christian liberty in Milton's narrative.

Within this dialectic, the Christian fathers himself by actions conformable to a providential text that God not only foresees but also reveals – in the form of a set of narrative patterns. These patterns, the characteristic structures of biblical narrative, are revealed to Adam by Michael in the final two books of the poem. The recognition of these scriptural patterns in everyday life provides a context for moral action, for the judgments and choices through which Milton's Christians are to author themselves. The way in which the narrative structure of *Paradise Lost* establishes this superimposition of an eternal pattern and a dramatically developing situation is the principal theme of my study. The revision of Adam's own brief (auto)biography, when it is reread in light of the patterns provided by Michael's synopsis of biblical history, provides a model for the application of scriptural narrative to moral choice and for the narrative strategy of Milton's poem. The mediation of experience by a narrative revelation is represented in Milton's text by a temporal structure that projects St. Paul's distinction of the letter and the Spirit in a peculiar and unexpected way.

Michael tells Adam that in the time of the apostles, the moral application of the Gospels was made through the living witness of their authors, but

at length

Thir Ministry perform'd, and race well run,  
Thir doctrine and thir story written left,  
They die; but in thir room, as they forewarn,  
Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous Wolves,  
Who all the sacred mysteries of Heav'n  
To thir own vile advantages shall turn  
Of lucre and ambition, and the truth  
With superstitions and traditions taint,

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Left only in those written Records pure,  
 Though not but by the Spirit understood. (XII.504-14)

The written word is at once the only pure record of Christ's ministry, yet subject to corruptions. The superstitions and traditions that taint the Gospel must be presumed to enter the pure writings when they are preached. After all, it is the corrupt clergy who are the grievous wolves that succeed to teach the holy word. Corruption enters the tradition when the texts are "read," as they are returned from the silence of the letter to the living word of the preacher. Bereft of the authentic preaching of those who witnessed the events they preach, the written word becomes an archive of a truth that can enter living discourse only in corrupt form. Egress from this predicament is through the displacement of the "reading" from an exterior to an interior voice.<sup>5</sup> The written text is to be collated with "what the Spirit within / Shall on the heart engrave" (XII.523-4). Self-authorship, in so far as it depends upon the use of revealed truth, requires a dialectical process of double readings. One authors oneself by acting out a story already written in the regenerate heart.<sup>6</sup> The Christian is released from the self-enthrallment of the fall by conforming his or her personal mythos to an internalized logos. The community of Christians is founded on a sort of silent reading: The Spirit voices the letter in the heart.

Reason and affection are the faculties through which the Spirit is heard and the community joined. The Father's foreknowledge does not impair the authorship (or authority) of Adam and Eve; they enthrall themselves by their disobedience. When Eve calls Adam "My Author and Disposer" (IV.635), she recognizes him as her origin and acknowledges his authority over her, but, we learn in the separation and temptation scenes in book IX the extent to which her judgments and choices express and determine her moral ethos. God, as "Author of this Universe" (VIII.360), is situated as Adam's authority as Adam is Eve's. The sharing of authority in this way is a precondition of but not an infringement on the freedom to write one's story out of one's acts. Adam and Eve participate with each other and with God in "authoring" the history of this world until the fall, when "exorbitant desire" takes control. In the

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postlapsarian world, authority over the self is restored when the individual fathers the Father in himself, by writing out in actions the story the Spirit both writes and reads in the human heart.

The use of writing as a model for the structure of the self-information and the ambivalence of individual action and communal destiny implicit in the notion of joint action through obedience to a common, yet interior, voice reflect a conception of history as the progress of second causes that is becoming dominant in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> Milton's chiasmic reversal of the metaphor of authorship – through which an individual authors himself by acting out a story foreseen and revealed by God – marks *Paradise Lost* as the narrative expression of a sense of the historical self coming into being in Milton's time.

As we shall see, the characteristically Protestant poetics so carefully reconstructed in recent criticism of seventeenth-century religious poetry may be understood as the adaptation of traditional hermeneutics to the needs of this newly developing conception of the individual as an actor on the historical stage.<sup>8</sup> Before proceeding to a reading of *Paradise Lost*, I want to elaborate further these two claims: 1) that the metaphor of authorship discloses a rhetoric common to the reading of a narrative and the formation of the self-inaction as Milton understood it; and 2) that the assertion of this common structure reflects a specifically Protestant and seventeenth-century experience of time and history. I shall consider the more general case first – that of a common structure underlying the metaphoric identification of writing and historical action.

## II

The most important of these [elements of tragedy] is the arrangement of incidents, for tragedy is an imitation, not of men but of action and life, of happiness and misfortune. These are to be found in action, and the goal of life is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Men are what they are because of their characters, but it is in action that they find happiness or the reverse.<sup>9</sup>

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For Aristotle, plot is a feature of life as well as art. Tragedy imitates actions because "character is a by-product of the action."<sup>10</sup> The view from within the fiction would be different. The individual who acts experiences action as a by-product of character, sees what he or she does as a function of who he or she is. If we return now to the passage from *Paradise Lost* III with which I began, we can say that Adam and Eve are free to act according to their judgments and choices but that once they act, an ethos or a moral character is disclosed. The Father foresees their acts and so knows the nature of that character before they do. However, there is a serious ambiguity concealed in the difference between his point of view and theirs. Do actions simply disclose character or do they form it? Is the individual destined to live out the consequences of his innate characteristics, or does character develop in response to experience? It is here that the authorship of creator and creature overlap. If we are to take seriously the Father's claim that Adam and Eve are "authors to themselves," we should see the judgments and choices they make in response to what they experience as contingent circumstances as not simply calling for the exercise of an innate capacity for judgment but as exercising and developing that capacity. Presumably, it is through such exercise of the judgment that Adam and Eve might have "improv'd by tract of time" (V.498) had they remained obedient.<sup>11</sup> Thus a person moving through a sequence of temporal actions both forms and discovers his or her character through and within the medium of his or her experience. To form and recognize character in this way, one must conceive of oneself as a subject moving through time, both self-consistent and capable of change.<sup>12</sup> It is this relation of the self to time that I shall call historical consciousness. An individual conceiving of himself in this way, evaluates his actions not only in relation to an immediate situation but also in relation to his image of himself as a particular sort of person, author of a particular sort of life story, and actor in the broader world history of which his personal story forms a part.

In *Paradise Lost*, the inability to function *historically* is manifest in Satan, who boasts of "a mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time" (I.253). In contrast Adam recognizes the irreversibility of historical action when he laments the finality of Eve's disobedience, "past who can recall, or done undo? / Not God Omnipotent, nor Fate"

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(IX.926–7). While Adam and Eve begin to regain authorship by cultivating the lands of the “subjected Plain,” that is by re-forming themselves in the medium of history, Satan, unable to enter history except as an agent of providence, retreats into the false autonomy of the objectless or nondialectical “subject,” the unchanging mind that is “its own place, and *in itself* / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (l.254–5; my emphasis).

Thus, in Book XI, Michael advises Adam to make judgments not in terms of what seems immediately gratifying but for the benefit of the self he is both creating and discovering:

Judge not what is best  
By pleasure, though to Nature seeming meet,  
Created, as thou art, to nobler end  
Holy and pure, conformity divine. (603–6)

Adam’s “nobler end” has both a logical and a temporal sense. It is the realization of the divine archetype that is his formal cause and the “conformity divine” ultimately enjoyed by the renovated soul, the completion of history as the fulfillment of providence. If Adam is to author himself by judging and choosing, he must temper his judging with knowledge of his “nobler end” as both formal and final cause, intention and terminus. Such knowledge – available in the Scriptures in correlation with the law engraved in the heart – must guide the judgments he makes as his temporal history unfolds. (Self)knowledge of the “nobler end” of “conformity divine,” that at which all action should aim, specifically supersedes and displaces judgments made according to Nature, which, because it is instinctive and not subject to development, excludes freedom and responsibility. Adam by taking the writing of the Spirit in the heart as his ideal is able to sublimate his natural appetites and aspire to conformity with the image of God. In fact it is this image of the self to be constructed that raises Adam above the beasts and endows him with the moral responsibility necessary to self-authorship.<sup>13</sup>

In practice, the informed judgments of Adam and Eve require two steps. They must first imagine that the events they experience seriatim form a discernible and meaningful pattern, and then make such choices as will conform that pattern to their understanding of

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the revealed patterns of providence. They must author a life history conformable to that which God desires. To judge and choose well, it is necessary to match the story one is writing to a revelation of providence's story of all things.<sup>14</sup>

The identification of text and action implicit in *Paradise Lost* is made explicit in some recent investigations of the ways in which history may be known. Philosophers working in the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics and others pursuing "the analytical philosophy of history" have converged on "the logic of narration" as a means of characterizing historical knowledge.<sup>15</sup> For example, Paul Ricoeur, a major exponent of contemporary hermeneutics, argues "that in one way the notion of the text is a good *paradigm* for human action, in another the action is a good referent for a whole category of texts."<sup>16</sup> This is so partly because human action leaves a mark on subsequent historical developments that are beyond the reach of the actor's intention:

Human action is in many ways a quasi-text. It is exteriorized in a manner comparable to the fixation characteristic of writing. In becoming detached from its agent, the action acquires an autonomy similar to the semantic autonomy of a text; it leaves a trace, a mark. It is inscribed in the course of things and becomes an archive and document. Even more like a text, of which the meaning has been freed from the initial conditions of its production, human action has a stature that is not limited to its importance for the situation in which it initially occurs, but allows it to be reinscribed in new social contexts. Finally, action, like a text, is an open work, addressed to an indefinite series of possible "readers." The judges are not contemporaries, but subsequent history.<sup>17</sup>

Ricoeur argues that the "dialectic of understanding [*Verstehen*] and explanation [*Erklaren*]" governing the interpretation of texts may be similarly used as a model for the interpretation of human actions, and he distinguishes *understanding*, which seeks insight into the "historical human subject," from analytic or "scientific" knowledge, which is "objective" and ahistorical.<sup>18</sup> In Ricoeur's dialectic, historical episodes are *explained* in terms of causation but *understood* in



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terms of intention: "The human phenomenon is situated . . . between a causality that requires explanation and not understanding, and a motivation requiring a purely rational understanding."<sup>19</sup>

Thus a narrative plot may be *explained* as a causal series of connected episodes, but it will be *understood* as the disclosure of character, of the motives and intentions of a fictive subject. Milton's presentation of Adam and Eve as author-readers of their own life histories implicitly anticipates Ricoeur's argument for a homology of the structure of the narrative text and historical actions. We may take for an example the interpretation of the daughters of Cain episode in Book XI. Adam's recollection of his "nobler end" and "conformity divine" leads him from natural explanation – the daughters of Cain are good because they give delight – to historical understanding – although delight in beauty is not evil in itself, delight in the daughters of Cain is misplaced because these "fair Atheists" (625) are "bred only and completed to the taste / Of lustful appetence" (618–19) and will spoil the Sons of God "for which / The world erelong a world of tears must weep" (626–7). The historical episode is understood only when placed in the prospect of the completed narrative of history itself. Only the long or retrospective view discloses the motives and intentions, the interior "truths," that determine the quality of the sequence of actions.

In a fictive narrative or a narrativization of experience, cause and motive may be expressed as a dialectical synthesis of prospective and retrospective points of view. Milton's text uses metaphor to project these two points of view in a hierarchical structure so that the "eternal" or retrospective experience of time rhetorically masters the immediate or, as I shall call it, dramatic experience of time. In the dialectic of plot and action of the historical text Adam and Eve write, present action is motivated in part by anticipated result. In fact, we can say more generally that the meaning of any action resides in its consequence. The meaning of an action is its historical effect.<sup>20</sup> Because the consequences of an act remain in question as long as history continues to be written, meaning depends upon a proleptic view of history as complete. For Milton, the eschaton of Christian revelation supplies this view.<sup>21</sup>

The Christian view of history, reaching back to creation and forward to the apocalypse, provides the model according to which the

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apparent contingencies encountered in the temporal unfolding of individual human experience may be rendered meaningful. Each episode in Milton's poem or in the life of the Christian believer becomes significant in two registers. It is understood *contingently*, in a dramatically developing situation, as a link in an unbroken chain of causes and effects connecting episode to episode, and *significantly* as an episode in "the Race of time, / Till time stand fixt: beyond is all abyss, / Eternity, whose end no eye can reach" (XII.554–6).

Christians living in dramatic time know their own mortality and therefore understand the historicity of their actions as forming episodes on the way to the final terminus of death.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, collective life has an end point when "The World shall burn, and from her ashes spring / New Heav'n and Earth" (III.334–5). Mediating individual destiny and collective destiny – life history and world history – are the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and second coming of Christ. As Adam realizes, when integrating his life into the world history supplied by Michael in the final books, "to the faithful Death [is] the Gate of Life" (XII.571) and apocalypse the beginning of new heaven and earth.<sup>23</sup> The individual Christian is then situated at the point where prolepsis and analepsis cross; he or she performs acts from within time that are to be evaluated *sub specie aeternitatis*. This rhetorical crossing or chiasmus is made historical by Christ's cross, on which the temporal and eternal realms are materially joined for all time by a sacrificial act performed *within time*. Because revelation previews the history of the future, the Christians authoring themselves through their mundane actions are in the position of readers who at once read and reread a story. Louis Mink, writing on the cognitive use of narrative, clarifies what is at stake in the distinction between these two activities:

What I mean to suggest is that the difference between following a story and *having followed* a story is more than the incidental difference between present experience and past experience. . . . [T]o know an event by retrospection is categorically, not incidentally, different from knowing it by prediction or anticipation. It cannot even, in any strict sense,