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0521343577 - Remembering and Repeating Biblical Creation in *Paradise Lost*

Regina M. Schwartz

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Whoever considers the few radical positions which the Scriptures afforded him, will wonder by what energetick operation he expanded them to such extent, and ramified them to so much variety ...

Samuel Johnson, *Milton*

REPEATING

Milton was preoccupied with origins. He wrote of the origin of the cosmos, the birth of his god, the birth of the first man and the first woman, the first utterance, the first interpretation, the first temptation, the first rebellion, the first home, and the first exile. And he did so by returning to the work he regarded as the first of texts, the Bible, and, even then, to its beginning, Genesis. His appropriation of Biblical tradition was hardly inhibiting. Even as he invoked the Muse of Sinai, he made the most radical claim for innovation possible: to pursue “Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme.” And yet for all of his preoccupation with origins, Milton approached the subject uneasily in *Paradise Lost*. There, he is not certain that beginnings are accessible, and, if they are, he is not sure that they can be expressed guiltlessly. His creation stories are always mediated – by accounts and accounts of accounts – by Raphael, by Uriel, by angelic hymns, by the reconstructions of memory, and by a theory that casts doubt on the ability of language to convey origins at all. Milton does not even depict the cosmic creation as a privileged beginning, a single event that occurred once-upon-a-time and for all time. Rather, his notion of beginning, like Said’s, is that “beginning is basically an activity which ultimately implies return and repetition rather than simply linear accomplishment.”¹ With chaos continually threatening, creation must be perpetually reasserted. For Milton, every act is an act of origin, and, conversely, the original act is an iteration.²

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For all of his sympathy with postmodern thought on the iterative nature of origins, Milton's source is Biblical.³ The creation does not occur once-and-for-all in Genesis. While waters are first parted to create the cosmos, they are parted again at the Red Sea to create a people, and again at the Jordan to signal the creation of the nation. In many ways, the creation narrative is an inappropriate beginning for the Hebrew Bible; Exodus offers a far more likely beginning for the historical vision that dominates it.⁴ In fact, in light of ancient Israel's emphasis on historical redemption and her corollary polemic against the creation-fertility myths of neighboring cults, it is remarkable that the Biblical canon includes a creation narrative at all. The oldest credo of ancient Israel, Deuteronomy 26:5–9, omits an account of creation altogether, and composition history teaches that the creation narrative of Genesis 1 is a late addition. Nonetheless, ancient Israel chose not to forgo a creation narrative. Instead, her solution, and her genius, was to obviate any contradiction by assimilating the creation account to her history: the God who created the nation also created the world – both are redemptive acts. As Gerhard von Rad phrased it, the creation was written backwards, from the standpoint of the exodus.⁵ Two conclusions emerge. First, Biblical creation is bound fundamentally to the Bible's central myth of liberation, to the exodus from bondage; an origin does not tyrannically dictate an end. Second, to speak of Biblical origin at all, we would speak more accurately of Biblical origins. The Bible offers Milton a model of repeated beginnings.

In the opening invocation to *Paradise Lost*, where Milton is so concerned with first things, he has deferred the first words of the Bible. Instead of beginning “In the beginning . . .,” he begins with the fall and only then does he proceed to the account of creation.⁶

Of Man's First Disobedience and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of *Horeb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
*In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of Chaos*

(l. 1–10, my emphasis)

This inversion of the apparent Biblical order of creation and fall obtains throughout the poem: only after we meet the fallen angels

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in Books I and II do we hear Uriel's account of creation in Book III; the war in heaven and fall of the rebel host in Book VI is followed by Raphael's creation account in Book VII; and the fall of Adam and Eve in Books IX and X is followed by Michael's disclosure of the new creation in the final books of the poem. This large structural principle is writ small throughout *Paradise Lost*. Light repeatedly infuses plagues of darkness, and the exoduses follow the exiles. Satan's journey through the darkness of chaos brings him to the precincts of the sun and issues in Milton's invocation to light. Eve's nightmare gives way to an aubade. Even Satan's nocturnal designs of rebellion are quelled in the "morning" in heaven. But once we are attentive to the redemptive character of Biblical creation – its deep structure – it becomes clear that Milton's order only seems to depart from the Bible; instead, he is a most attentive reader, for in the Bible, a recurring pattern of chaos/order (fall/creation) describes an ongoing process of re-creation. Geoffrey Hartman writes that God's knowledge that creation will outlive Sin and Death is expressed so indirectly in *Paradise Lost* (he focuses on extended similes) that it forms a kind of counterplot. "For it does not often work on the reader as independent theme or subplot, but lodges in the vital parts of the overt action, emerging from it like good from evil."⁷ In the course of this study, I will make the workings of that counterplot explicit.

REMEMBERING

Repeating is linked to remembering in the Bible, where both assume the sacred context of ritual commemoration. Such commemoration does not begin after an event; rather, ritual repetition becomes part of the event itself. In Exodus, the narration of the Israelites' departure from Egypt is interrupted abruptly – when they are just on the verge of their escape – to prescribe the ritual celebration of the events to follow. The exodus has not yet concluded when the command is given that it must be annually commemorated in the Passover. This ritualization of the event even as it occurs – this building-in of repetition in the first instance – is also evident in the Priestly creation account. The relation between text, utterance, and ritual is an especially rich one in Genesis 1:1–2:4a: the days of the creation comprise a ritual calendar, each marked by the repetitive, "and it was good," a phrase whose ritual force is much like "amen." The final day narrates, not just the creation of another feature of the cosmos, but the creation of the sabbath, that is, the *commemoration*

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of the events of the prior six days. That sabbath does not stand *apart* from the creation, thereby commemorating an original act; the prescription to repeat and remember the creation is *part of the creation*. Without that provision for ritualized repetition, the creation itself would be incomplete. There would be no seventh day.

Milton was fascinated by this ritualization of the event in the event. In *De Doctrina Christiana* (I. x) he indulges in his own composition history, imagining some editorial patchwork by Moses in order to stress – up front, in Genesis, rather than later, in the Law – the commemorative function of the sabbath. “As for the Sabbath, it is clear that God sanctified it as his own, *in memory of the completion of his task*, and dedicated it to rest”; Milton then directs us to Genesis 2:2–3 and Exodus 31:17: “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; . . . It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed” (Ex. 31:15–17).⁸ Milton’s interest in this verse that enjoins the Israelites to remember is keen enough to prompt several more interpretive maneuvers: noting the illogic of commemorating the creation to Israelites before there are Israelites, Milton is troubled enough to elaborate an explanation.

But it is not known, because there is nothing about it in scripture, whether this was ever disclosed to Adam or whether any commandment about the observance of the Sabbath existed before the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, let alone before the fall of man. Probably Moses, who seems to have written the book of Genesis long after the giving of the law, inserted this sentence from the fourth commandment [in Exodus] in what was, as it were, an opportune place [the Priestly creation narrative]. Thus he seized an opportunity of *reminding* the people about the reason, which was, so to speak, topical at this point in his narrative, but which God had really given many years later to show why he wanted the Sabbath to be observed by his people, with whom he had at long last made a solemn covenant.

(*CP*, 6, 353–54, my emphasis)⁹

Milton says that a reason for the sabbath has been assigned by God, to commemorate; that Moses, intuiting the spirit of that reasoning, moved the verse to enable the Israelites to remember better; and that Milton, intuiting the import of remembering in the scripture, has been able to reconstruct Moses’ reasons for moving that verse (if he did). This interest in the Biblical commemoration of creation also assumed poetic shape: as the Bible ritualizes the creation in the sabbath, so Milton’s account makes the same provision: in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, the work of each day is celebrated with a complete angelic worship service.

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Remembering becomes the explicit subject of Deuteronomy (literally, the second or duplicate law). A second Moses enjoins the Israelites to remember the events of the exodus, and he proceeds to repeat that story – a second time – a repetition designed to inscribe the memory of what is to be remembered on his hearers.¹⁰ As Moses retells the exodus, he asks that the Israelites similarly retell those events to subsequent generations. This commemoration is not simply retrospective; it is also forward-looking, for Israel's future is at stake in that memory.

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which he swore to your fathers, ... with great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of ... bondage ... lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth. (Deut. 6:6–15)

The stark juxtaposition of the promise of Israel's plenty with the threat of complete annihilation is interrupted only by the injunction not to forget.

The Deuteronomic logic of memory informs *Paradise Lost*, where Satan offers the temptation to forget, and to forget the Creator, the Redeemer, is to fall. Satan's question haunts a poem persistently engaged in inquiring into origins: "who saw / When this creation was? remember'st thou / Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?" (V. 856–58). If it is countered, it is by Raphael's injunction to Adam, "remember, and fear to transgress" (VI. 912), a warning he delivers after he has rehearsed his narrative of creation. As another second Moses, Milton joins the Deuteronomic Moses in remembering the past to redeem the future, punctuating his epic with both the injunction to remember and the rehearsal of the creation to be remembered. "A grateful recollection of the divine goodness is the first of human obligations; and extraordinary favors demand more solemn and devout acknowledgments" (Hughes, 817) opens the *Defensio Secunda*. And in *Ad Patrem*, Milton begins by despairing that he can never repay his father's gift of life, but he concludes consoled that he can "remember and tell over" his kindnesses. His epic would fulfill that promise to his Heavenly Father.

I begin, in the first chapter, with the cosmogonic repetition, offering it as a paradigm of a chaos that continually threatens and

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a creation that must be perpetually reasserted. In the next two chapters, I turn from the cosmic to the poetic creation where the threat of chaos also prevails. Chapter 2 concerns the poet's access to origins. Milton reformulates that problem, veering away from how to seek an objectified creation, whether "out there" or "back then," to the posture of the seeker. An imperial motive for inquiry – research that would possess its object – leads only to the return of chaos. When knowledge of creation is sought to praise, rather than to possess it, that celebration issues in further re-creations. In the third chapter, I turn to the expression of creation. Ritual commemoration of creation, like keeping the sabbath, keeps chaos at bay. But the ritual force of Milton's sacred song is never assured. If Milton wants to confer his language with performative power, he must contend with the difficulties of interpretation that attend such performance. In the last chapter I address the subject of repetition itself. I contrast ritual repetition of the creation with a repetition that is opposed to creation, pathological repetition. If ritual inscribes memory, mere repetition, like Blake's "same dull round," is predicated upon forgetting. Satan's stubborn will to reenact his battle with substitutes entraps him in an endless cycle he cannot escape. In contrast, Adamic repetition is repetition with a difference, one that can not only accommodate innovation, but is built upon the difference implied by memory – the admission of the pastness of the past.

A book that began as an effort to distinguish pathological from ritual repetition soon became suspicious of the entire enterprise of distinction-making, one which has, in one form or another, dominated Milton criticism for many decades. Among the more prominent distinctions we inherit are between Milton's "intention" and his "practice": whenever a contradiction is noted between these constructs, Milton has been indicted for being unable to maintain consistency. Despite his plan (which many claim access to), Milton created a tyrannizing God; despite his plan, Milton created an attractive Satan. There have also been more sophisticated approaches to distinction-making. As an instrument of education, the poem teaches the reader how to make distinctions, conferring that lesson in subtle and complicated ways that include wrong choices.¹¹ But, for all of this critical commitment to the notion of Milton's "poetry of choice,"¹² Milton himself tells us that opposites constitute one another. Good and evil are twin-born; the knowledge of them both is "involved and interwoven," "the matter of them both is the same," he tells us in *Areopagitica*. And so, while I begin this book

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with a fundamental opposition, between creation and chaos, and make it my paradigm for other distinctions – between licit and illicit knowledge, language that ritually performs and language that cannot, ritual and pathological repetition – all of those distinctions break down in the face of the *continual* struggle between oppositions. “Alternatives” may never clarify themselves into a choice at all; rather, the poem may offer at all moments the possibility of both. If cosmos must repeatedly defeat chaos, it is because chaos inheres in it. In the Babylonian account of creation, the heavens and the earth are formed from the divided body of the chaos monster, Tiamat; and in Genesis 1, the original waters of chaos, Tehom, are divided by the firmament to create the world. To understand the logic of an iterative creative act is ultimately to understand that creation and chaos are so “involved and interwoven” that they constitute one another. The unspoken temptation of *Paradise Lost* may be to assume that its options achieve resolution, when, instead, they poise us ever on the brink of the clarity choice offers – so very tantalizingly.

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1

“AND THE SEA WAS NO MORE”:
CHAOS VS. CREATION

The angels fell; man’s soul fell; and their fall shows us what a deep chasm of darkness would still have engulfed the whole spiritual creation if you had not said at the beginning “*Let there be light*”; and the light began. Augustine, *Confessions*

Milton the theologian is as emphatic and unambiguous as he could be on the subject of a good chaos.

This original matter was not an evil thing, nor to be thought of as worthless: it was good, and it contained the seeds of all subsequent good. It was a substance, and could only have been derived from the source of all substance. It was in a confused and disordered state at first, but afterwards God made it ordered and beautiful. (CP, 6, 308)

He goes on to anticipate the objection that, lacking form, such a first matter must have been imperfect: “But in fact, matter was not, by nature, imperfect. The addition of forms (which, incidentally, are themselves material) did not make it more perfect but only more beautiful.” In Milton’s cosmos, all proceeds from God, a good God; hence, all – including first matter – must be good.

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 ...

(V. 469–72)

Milton argues for a good chaos with good reason. Not only is it consistent with his materialistic cosmos, it is vital to the success of his theodicy. An evil chaos would indict, rather than justify a God from whom all proceeds, accusing him of fashioning a universe rotten at its very core. Then, too, any intimation of an evil creative act would soon plunge Milton into the mire of Gnostic thinking so antithetical to his own cosmology that it suggests Blake’s radical revision instead. Milton’s creation is no “fall” into base materialism; it is an

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emanation of divine goodness. He even substitutes the theory of creation *de Deo* for the orthodox doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to safeguard its goodness.¹

If the author of an evil chaos were not God, the implications would be equally heretical: an evil principle coeternal with God suggests dualism at worst; at best, some hedge upon divine omnipotence. But we know Milton to be an avowed and consistent monist. Meric Casaubon (1599–1671) thought that the devil introduced to men the common mistakes concerning the origin of evil, prominent among them “that God is not omnipotent, and wanted not will, but power to amend what they conceived to be amiss in the world: or, that there were two Authors and Creators of all things, the one good, and the other evil ... For, said they, were God as omnipotent, as he is good, why hath he not made all things as goodnesse would have prompted?”² With no less than the justice, oneness, and omnipotence of God at stake, Milton’s position on the nature of chaos is no arcane piece of cosmological speculation. Rather, it is with the greatest care that he must deliberately and explicitly assert the goodness of first matter.

There is, nonetheless, a dark side to even his most confident assertions. Raphael’s definitive-sounding discourse on cosmic perfection finesses the problem of evil, relegating it unobtrusively to the passive voice. All is perfect if not “deprav’d from good.” This must be among the most troubling uses of the passive in the poem: “deprav’d” by whom, given that all proceeds from God; and how and why is such a corruption of a perfect creation even possible? Here, in the most explicit doctrine of a perfect world, the possibility of its corruption still lurks. We are offered a creation that cannot be evil but can become evil, as mysteriously as that agentless passive. Just how far back to seek the source of that corruption – whether in the fall of man, of Satan, in a flawed creation, or in the Creator himself – is the hard question the epic both invites and silences.

A cosmological explanation for the problem of evil has not been the primary approach of Christianity. Instead, it has focused on man’s fall and on the redemption from the fall made possible by divine mercy. Seeking the origin of evil in the universe itself invites the kinds of questions Casaubon attributes to the devil, with dualism prominent among them. Augustine, the theologian who does inquire into the cosmological dimension, offers a solution that preserves both God’s goodness and his omnipotence: evil is privation. But Milton’s uncompromising monism leads him to suspect latent dualism even here, to wonder if Augustine has not merely substituted “nothing”

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for evil as a second principle. A. S. P. Woodhouse tells us that Milton's doctrine of a good first matter turns him away from the "avowed dualism of the Platonic tradition, and the concealed dualism of the Augustinian, to a form of monism." With that insistence upon a single good substrate of all things, Woodhouse claims, Milton "cuts away the cosmological groundwork of ... evil, ... sacrific[ing] the Christian solution of the problem of evil on the cosmological level."³ I would suggest that, on the contrary, it is precisely to this level that Milton's inquiry leads him. In his quest for beginnings – "Say first," he implores the Muse of Creation, "say first what cause / Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy state, / Favor'd of Heaven so highly, to fall off" (I. 28–30) – Milton is thrust back again and again to *the* beginning. And for all its disturbing implications, the chaos he finds there is far more hostile than he would ever acknowledge in prose. Despite his doctrine of a good chaos, his poem depicts a very different one: a region that is "waste and wild" and an allegorical figure who claims that "havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain."

Impressive scholarly excavation has been done on the subject of Milton's chaos, searching out its rightful place in tradition. A. B. Chambers has explored Milton's debt to classical antiquity and A. S. P. Woodhouse has located it in its Neoplatonic context, but surprisingly little has been written about the imaginative place of chaos in Milton's poem itself.⁴ By and large, scholars have taken their cue from *De Doctrina Christiana*, accepting Milton's word on the goodness of first matter. When they have peered into the chaos of the epic, they have found it, at worst, neutral. Robert M. Adams tells us that "Chaos is neutral as between good and evil; all he likes is disorder. That inclines him to evil, of course, but not all the way, for evil is itself a principle of order; and Chaos is, so to speak, beyond good and evil."⁵ Even so, Adams is apparently drawn toward another conclusion, one he rejects only on the grounds that evil must be "organized." But far from being ordered, evil is the very violation of order in *Paradise Lost*, with Satan himself the harbinger of disorder. He promises to turn the new world over to chaos and his "designs" of imperialism degenerate into the upheaval of mountains in heaven. Satan's protean nature – clouded angel, good cherub, toad, cormorant, serpent – is reminiscent of the "unstable visage" of the Anarch, Chaos, and the Adversary's countenance (or one of them) is distorted by chaotic passions on Mt. Niphates. Michael Lieb also finds chaos itself neutral: "The Abyss is not inherently evil, although it can be put to evil use.