

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost
Edited by Louis Schwartz
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

STEPHEN M. FALLON

Milton as Narrator in *Paradise Lost*

Milton, as the narrator of *Paradise Lost*, rises out of a sea of relatively anonymous European epic narrators. In the poem's several invocations, Milton revises the definition of heroism to mean telling rather than acting, bringing order to the world not by arms but, to borrow from his later epic, *Paradise Regained*, "By winning words to conquer willing hearts" (PR 1.223). The narrator's description of his experience and situation, moreover, suggests that there is little demarcation between narrator and author. The line we are used to drawing between poet and narrator, between author and speaker, is difficult if not impossible to find in *Paradise Lost*.

At the front of the epic tradition stands the anonymous, composite "Homer." While both Homeric epics contain apostrophes to characters, the narrator himself otherwise remains impersonal, with the *Odyssey's* invocation "Sing in me [lit. Tell me], Muse" (1.1) marking a minute step beyond the *Iliad's* "Anger be now your song, immortal one [lit. Sing, Goddess]" (1.1). Aristotle turned to Homer for his model of excellence in epic, not least for the near-anonymity of his narration. In his *Poetics*, he praises Homer for saying "very little *in propria persona*" and letting the narrative unfold primarily in the words of his characters (1460a5–12). Virgil follows Homer's practice and Aristotle's prescription. His self-references in the *Aeneid* are limited to the poem's first line ("Armum virumque cano/ Arms and the man I sing") and to a handful of brief apostrophes.

Milton rejects Aristotle's prescription. He employs first-person singular pronouns five times in his first twenty-six lines. And it is not only the frequency with which Milton's narrator refers to himself that sets him apart, but also his taking on the role of hero and the increasing convergence, as the epic proceeds, of the narrator's self-descriptions and the facts of the author's life. Milton suspends the narration of the feats of the nominal hero, the "one greater man" who will "Restore us, and regain the blissful seat" (1.4–5), until the end of the epic, where it takes up a mere 105 lines (12.359–463). Among the candidates to fill the intervening void is Milton himself, who

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

FALLON

begins *Paradise Lost* by invoking God to inspire his “advent’rous song,/ That with no middle flight intends to soar/ Above th’Aonian mount,” turning his “justify[ing] the ways of God to men” into a heroic act (1.13–15, 26). He fashions himself as second only (if second at all) to Moses, the “shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed” (1.8). He inserts himself also into the two other major invocations, in Books 3 and 7, and into the near-invocation in Book 9, turning his narrator and himself into an epic character in his own right. In these invocations he wrestles with doubts about the authenticity of the very inspiration that makes his audacious song possible. If those doubts are warranted, Milton risks the fate of Satan, who aspires above his place. The recurring danger of falling from prophetic election to Satanic presumption thus becomes a key subplot. When in Book 9 Milton explicitly redefines true heroism as involving “patience and heroic martyrdom” (9.32), he is pointing in part to the arduous and potentially dangerous labor of invention required by his chosen subject: “... long choosing, and beginning late” (9.25–26).

Begin late he did. His nephew Edward Phillips reports that Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* in his early fifties, starting around 1658 (“two years before the king came in”) and finishing four or five years later (Darbishire 13). He most likely reached the midpoint of the poem around the time of the restoration of Charles II, when Milton, who had good reason to fear for his life, first went into hiding and then was jailed for months. Writing between the autumn and spring equinoxes, Milton composed between ten and thirty lines per day. Intriguingly, Phillips relates in his biography that the subject of the “heroic poem, entitled *Paradise Lost* ... was first designed a tragedy,” and that Milton had shown him several years earlier ten lines designed to be its beginning (these now begin Satan’s soliloquy to the sun [Darbishire 72–3; *PL* 4.32–41]). Fortunately, four early plans for that tragedy survive in Milton’s Trinity Manuscript, a notebook in Milton’s hand.

With their choruses and allegorical figures, the first three plans show the influence of the Italian *dramma per musica*, or oratorio; Milton probably composed these not long after August 1639, when he returned from Italy. Adam, Eve, Michael, Moses, and Lucifer share the stage with Heavenly Love; Conscience; the theological virtues Faith, Hope, and Charity; and a melancholy crowd including Death, Labor, Sickness, Discontent, and Ignorance, among others. While the first plans contain only character lists, the third, titled “Paradise Lost,” begins to fill in what will become the shape of Milton’s epic, with choral songs describing creation, paradise, and the marriage of Adam and Eve (*YP* 8:554–55, 559–60). Significantly, the audience is to see Adam and Eve directly only after their fall, because, as Moses “prologuizes,” fallen spectators “cannot se Adam in the state of innocence by reason of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)Milton as Narrator in *Paradise Lost*

thire sin.” This plan presents Lucifer “contriving Adam’s ruine” and moves directly to the fallen Adam and Eve, as they are exhorted by Conscience and presented by an angel with the evils listed above (8:554–55).

The fourth plan, “Adam unparadiz’d,” contains still more of the elements of *Paradise Lost*: an angel visits earth to see the new created man (Gabriel here, Satan in the future epic), the chorus sings the War in Heaven, and, foreshadowing *Paradise Lost* 10, “Adam then & Eve ... accuse one another but especially Adam layes the blame to his wife, is stubborn in his offence” (8:560). Mercy, in the role later played by Michael, relates the future and the promise of the Messiah. Once again, however, the audience is not to see Adam and Eve before their fall, presumably owing in part to the impossibility of actors performing nude. In turning from stage to page, Milton will leave behind this constraint and present Adam and Eve “with native honor clad/ In naked majesty” (*PL* 4.289–90). Milton will be allowed to see, and to share with his audience, what his Moses in early drafts hid behind a veil.

At the same time that he was projecting a tragedy of the Fall, Milton was casting about for a subject for an epic poem. In his 1639 *Epitaphium Damonis* he promises an Arthurian epic, as he had months earlier in *Manso*, a poem dedicated to the patron of Tasso, author of the great Italian epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. And he alludes to this ambition again in 1642, wondering aloud, in an autobiographical digression in *The Reason of Church-Government*, “what K[ing] or Knight before the conquest might be chosen in whom to lay the pattern of a Christian *Heroe*” (*YP* 1:813–14). For the next fifteen or sixteen years, however, political events prevented Milton, occupied first as a pamphleteer and then as spokesperson for Commonwealth and Protectorate, from doing more with this last plan than composing the Satanic verses that Phillips saw. During this time Milton abandoned plans for an Arthurian epic. He decided to repurpose his plans for a Genesis tragedy as the foundation of a great biblical epic.

In ultimately choosing a narrated over a dramatic form, Milton, notwithstanding Aristotle’s rule, opened a door for himself to enter the poem in his own voice and person. Milton, in my view, is not creating a character/ narrator such as Joseph Conrad’s Marlowe or Dickens’ David Copperfield, or an impersonal narrator of the kind familiar to us from the novels of Jane Austen or Thomas Hardy (for an opposing view, see Coiro). Going out of his way to identify the narrator with himself, Milton makes the telling of the story itself into a dramatic story. What the narrator in *Paradise Lost* says about himself fits not only the stories that Milton tells about himself elsewhere but also objective biographical facts available to us, down to repeating in the invocation to Book 3 his doctors’ diagnosis of the cause of his becoming blind in 1652 (3.23–26).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

FALLON

Consequently, early readers did not hesitate to identify Milton with his narrator. In 1695, Patrick Hume pointed to the passage just mentioned as an example of Milton writing about himself, as did the Jonathan Richardsons, father and son, in 1734 (Richardson 94). The Richardsons regard the narrator's lament in Book 7 that he is "fall'n on evil days,/ ... and evil tongues;/ In darkness, and with dangers compassed round/ And solitude" (7.25–28) and his taking comfort in the muse's nightly visits as matching precisely what they had learned of Milton's life. According to "a piece of Secret History" for which they had "Good Authority," Milton dictated his poem at a time when he "Apprehended himself to be in Danger of his Life ... (having been very Deeply engag'd against the Royal Party) and, when Safe by a Pardon, from Private Malice and Resentment[,] He was Always in Fear; Much Alone, and Slept Ill" (Richardson 291). In 1749, Thomas Newton echoed Hume's and the Richardsons' comments. His annotation to 9.1 not only identifies the narrator as Milton, but also defends Milton for violating epic precedent (and Aristotle's prescription) by speaking about himself:

These prologues or prefaces of Milton to some of his books, speaking of his own person, lamenting his blindness, and preferring his subject to those of Homer and Virgil and the greatest poets before him, are condemn'd by some critics: and it must be allow'd that we find no such digression in the *Iliad* or *Æneid*; it is a liberty that can be taken only by such a genius as Milton.... As Monsieur Voltaire says upon the occasion, I cannot but own that an author is generally guilty of an unpardonable self-love, when he lays aside his subject to descant upon his own person: but that human frailty is to be forgiven in Milton; nay I am pleased with it. He gratifies the curiosity he has raised in me about his person; when I admire the author, I desire to know something of the man; and he, whom all readers would be glad to know, is allow'd to speak of himself. (Newton, 2:123)

In several prose works Milton encourages us to expect him to speak in his poetry in his own voice about himself, rather than to work through the intermediary of a fictionalized narrator. In *The Reason of Church Government* he indicates that poets may speak directly of themselves, freed from the constraints of prose:

although a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him might without apology speak more of himself than I mean to do, yet for me sitting here below in the cool element of prose, a mortall thing among many readers of no Empyreall conceit, to venture and divulge unusual things of my selfe, I shall petition to the gentler sort, it may not be envy to me. (YP 1:808)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)Milton as Narrator in *Paradise Lost*

Milton then launches into an extended autobiographical account. Several months later, in April 1642, he comes near to equating the poet not merely with the narrator but with the poem:

he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought him selfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroick men or famous Cities, unlesse he have in himselfe the experience and the practice of all that which is praise-worthy. (*Apology for Smectymnuus*, YP 1:890)

The poet's life, character, and actions merge seamlessly, Milton insists, into heroic poetry. An immoral poet cannot write of a virtuous hero, and a true poem reveals the virtue of its poet. In July 1657, about the time that he began composing *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes to a correspondent that "he who would write worthily of worthy deeds ought to write with no less largeness of spirit and experience of the world than he who did them" (7:501). A book is intimately connected to its author; it is, he asserts in *Areopagitica* (1644), "the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life" (2:493).

Given Milton's understanding of the relation between poet and poem and of the qualities necessary for the heroic poet, and given that *Paradise Lost* is the fulfillment of his promise in the *Reason of Church Government* to write a work "doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation" (1:815), his approach to epic narration makes sense. To convince his readers (and himself?) that he is equal to his ambition, he must assert his virtue and his capacity for heroism. This, as I intimated earlier, is the work of the opening invocation, where he stakes his narrator's claim to be poet and prophet. Near the end of that invocation, Milton petitions God's spirit, asking for illumination and support and linking the creation of the epic with the creation of the universe:

thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support ... (*PL* 1.19–23)

While this is the least personal of the poem's proems, the allusive moment opens a window on what will be an increasingly intimate portrait. The *dark* of line 22 registers Milton's (conventional) modesty and, implicitly, the particular affliction – blindness – that will turn out to be a mark of divine favor.

What is implicit at the end of the first invocation becomes the central theme in the second, the great invocation to light in Book 3. This invocation, which, as we have seen, has long been cited as evidence of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

FALLON

autobiographical aspects of Milton's narrator, is twice as long as the first, and Milton devotes nearly four-fifths of it (13–55) to a meditation on his blindness, his inspiration, and the paradoxical but necessary link between them. Modeling himself on epic heroes, he claims, either boastfully or with relief (or both), to have “Escaped the Stygian pool, though long detained/ In that obscure sojourn,” as Odysseus had escaped detention on Kirke's and Kalypso's islands and as Aeneas had escaped Carthage. Like each of those heroes, he has also journeyed to the underworld, and he marks his re-ascent in terms borrowed from Virgil's Sybil, who tells Aeneas that “the way downward is easy from Avernus,/ .../ But to retrace your steps to heaven's air/ There is trouble, there is toil (*hoc opus/ hic labor est*)” (*Aeneid* 6.126–29). Milton echoes these words when he tells us, with triumphant concision, that his muse taught him “to venture down/ The dark decent, and up to reascend,/ Though hard and rare” (*PL* 3.19–21).

Precisely at this point the narrating Milton turns to pathos-laden self-representation. Having returned from his “dark descent,” he complains to the sun: “thou/ Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain/ To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn” (3.22–24). The second half and more of this invocation is a meditation on blindness and inner sight by turns anguished and triumphant. Milton associates himself with the inner vision of blind bards and prophets, hoping to be “equaled ... in renown” with Thamyras and Homer (“blind Maeonides”) and with “Tiresias and Phineus prophets old,” a fate dependent on an inspiration that enables “harmonious numbers” (3.34–38). Loss of eyesight is momentarily compensated by literary fame and prophetic insight, but immediately the anguish of blindness returns:

Thus with the year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of ev'n or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
Presented with a universal blank
Of Nature's works to me expunged and razed,
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out. (3.40–50)

In this brilliant passage Milton truncates the heartbreaking catalog of sights never to be seen again as abruptly as the caesura isolating the heavily stressed “Cut off” at the beginning of line 47, and he evokes the finality of blindness in another series of stressed monosyllables, “quite shut out.” This cry from the heart is again particularized to Milton's experience. As he wrote

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)Milton as Narrator in *Paradise Lost*

to Leonard Philaras in 1654, the blind Milton saw not black darkness but a milky whiteness (YP 4.2:869–70), “a universal blank” (a pun more obvious in the spelling – “blanc” – in the earliest editions).

The narrator’s oscillation between confident assertion and defensive anxiety echoes a similar oscillation in Milton’s prose. In his *Second Defense of the English People* (1654), Milton dismissed royalist claims that God blinded him for supporting the execution of Charles I:

Divine law and divine favor have rendered us not only safe from the injuries of men, but almost sacred, nor do these shadows around us seem to have been created so much by the dullness of our eyes as by the shade of angels’ wings. And divine favor not infrequently is wont to lighten these shadows again, once made, by an inner and far more enduring light. (4.1:590).

In similar fashion, at the moment of deepest pathos in Book 3’s invocation, unable to see the beauties of nature, Milton returns to the expectation of inner light with confidence warranted by the poem he is composing:

So much the rather thou celestial light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight. (PL 3.51–55)

Nevertheless, the invocation that ends with such confidence also betrays anxiety. Milton asked at the beginning if he can “express” holy light “unblamed” (3.3), which suggests concern lest he violate canons of secrecy. This invocation does not move steadily from doubt to confidence, but twice interrupts its confidence with anguished evocations of blindness. Although it ends hopefully, the impression is of Milton grappling with blindness, finding it both barely tolerable and a sign of election (Fallon 210–33).

In the third invocation, at the beginning of Book 7, the grappling continues. As the Richardsons recognized, Milton’s narrator describes himself as in the precise historical position of Milton shortly after the Restoration, when he probably wrote this section of the poem and when he was vulnerable to both legal and extralegal violence for his literary labors on behalf of the interregnum governments. The elegant chiasmus of “fall’n on evil days,/ On evil days though fall’n, and evil tongues” circles and encloses the narrator, an uneasy sense made explicit in the next line, “In darkness, and with dangers compassed round” (PL 7.25–28). Milton then raises the pathos with the phrase “And solitude,” caught alone at the beginning of the next line after a strong pause.

The anxiety in lines 25–28 colors the whole invocation. After calling again on the divine muse, now under the name of Urania (“The meaning, not the name I call” [7.5]), Milton spends most of the invocation warding

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02946-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Edited by Louis Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

FALLON

off dangers external and internal. Where he boasted in Book 1 that his song “intends to soar/ Above th’Aonian mount” (1.14–15), he now, having been drawn by the muse to possibly dangerous heights (“Up led by thee/ Into the Heav’n of Heav’ns I have presumed,/ An earthly guest”), asks to be returned to the safety of earth, his “native element” (7.12–14, 7.16). If a guest, Milton is authorized; if uninvited, he has crossed a forbidden boundary. In the midst of poetic flight, Milton worries that he will plunge to Earth, “Erroneous there to wander and forlorn” (7.20). The vivid term “forlorn” is associated in the poem with alienation from God. Up to this point it has been used only about or by devils (1.180, 2.615, and 4.374). If Milton fails, he risks ending up like them, forlorn and eternally wandering. Milton’s safety lies in authentic inspiration. He must be, as William Kerrigan writes, “both author and amanuensis” (Kerrigan 138). His inspiration must come from the divine muse that, unlike the “empty dream” that is the pagan muse, can protect the poet from the fate of the dismembered Orpheus, a fate that haunted Milton (*Lycidas* 58–63), and one that could have seemed far from unlikely in the days following the restoration, when angry mobs searched for those who, like Milton, had punished one Stuart king and opposed the crowning of another. Homer has Athena protect Odysseus, and Virgil has Venus protect her son Aeneas; in calling on divine protection, Milton once again places himself in the position of hero as well as narrator.

Milton opens Book 9 with another proem about inspiration, poetry, and heroism, but now without an invocation of a muse. Instead he reflects again on the authenticity of his inspiration and the implications of its withdrawal. Changing his “notes to tragic” (*PL* 9.6), he will write about the alienation of Adam and Eve from angels and God. The easy intercourse between Adam and Raphael, now ended, parallels the easy intercourse of Milton and his muse, or Milton and God; if the former can be lost, why not the latter? Milton is confident that his story is more heroic than those of pagan epic, of “Neptune’s ire or Juno’s, that so long/ Perplexed the Greek and Cytherea’s son” (9.18–19), and that true heroism lies in “the better fortitude/ Of patience and heroic martyrdom” (9.31–32), but his confidence is again shadowed by anxiety. The closing lines of the proem to Book 9 mark the end of a trajectory that began with the epic’s first lines, as Milton the poet and narrator has focused increasingly on the danger of making strong claims for inspiration and his own heroism. At the end of this last proem, Milton registers once more the very real worry that he has imagined rather than received divine inspiration:

higher argument
Remains, sufficient of itself to raise
That name, unless an age too late, or cold