

# A Guide to Interpreting *Paradise Lost*

Adapted slightly from Prof. Vicki Silver of UC Irvine

**1. Milton the poet is *not* the narrator of *Paradise Lost*:** the narrator functions both as instrument and as character in the narrative drama of the poem, along with Satan, God, the Son, Adam and Eve, and so forth. He also serves as surrogate for the reader, who is also fallen and sinful, and, to that extent, shares his sympathies. Finally, the mind of the narrator is the poem's mind, the imaginative conceiver and articulator of the narrative drama in all its peculiar vagaries and intricacies, a role to which the narrator himself constantly calls attention both by explicit meditation and by certain implicit signals. That is, Milton the poet dramatizes his own experience, and thereby fictionalizes it, through the person of the narrator.

**2. The biographical details or intimations that appear in the invocations suggest, however, that the narrator resembles Milton** and dramatizes the dilemmas the man faced while composing *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, we might want to read the invocations as dramatic enactments of Milton's own pursuit of poetic and narratorial authority. Thus, the narrator's problematic inspiration *simulates* Milton's own. Moreover, as with all narrative statements or exposition in *Paradise Lost*, the reader must appraise the invocations as poetic, and so formal, occasions that exist at one remove from Milton himself. Milton also dramatized himself in his sonnets, in which the speaker enunciates Milton's concerns without necessarily *being* Milton.

**3. The narrator's authority in *Paradise Lost* derives from the person or persons entreated in the invocations.** (By "authority," we mean the basis upon which he claims to have knowledge about God's ways and the manner in which he represents and justifies these ways to the reader.) The identities of these persons is rendered in metaphoric or symbolic terms. As in the sonnets, the speaker's *very act* of asking for assistance predicates a reply, which can only be the continuance of the narrative drama itself. The episodic occurrence of the invocations enacts, as well as it can, the speaker's uncertainty and partiality.

**4. It stands to reason that the narrator claims to receive his authority from one or another aspect of God himself.** That's because while the narrator's subject includes things to which scripture only refers elliptically—either without detail or explanation, as in *Genesis*, or symbolically and allegorically, as in *Isaiah*—these things are nonetheless central to providential history. (Note that the narrator seeks to assert God's providence, or design in history, at I.25.) In this claim to receive his authenticity of voice from God, Milton's narrator resembles the prophets and the writers of scripture. The particular identity of the "person" entreated—whether the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit—is not certain. If we take the invocations all together, however, it seems most likely that the speaker invokes the divine *Logos* as figured in *John* 1; that is, he invokes the pre-existent Christ and Son of God who serves as the Father's visible or manifest agent in both the creation and redemption of this world. To the Christian, Jesus of Nazareth was not only god but the teacher of the faith as well as its articulator in human terms. (*Logos* is the Greek word for "reason," "word," "discourse," "principle," "structure," and so on.) Thus, when the narrator refers to the muse as that person who "taught the chosen seed," it seems most likely that he refers to Jesus. The phrase "in the beginning" can refer not only to the opening of *Genesis* but to the opening of *John*: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (*John* 1.1-4). Given the Son's role in the creation and given the second invocation of *Paradise Lost* Book Three, we may conjecture that Christ is the "muse" upon whom Milton calls. In any case, Milton considers his muse "God."

**5. This divine person, or "muse," gives the narrator the power to conceive, represent verbally, and expound upon the events that led up to the fall of man—the story of *Paradise Lost*. However, that gift is ambivalent because it places the narrator, a fallen man, in imaginative proximity to the cause of the fall—Satan himself.** To the extent that both the narrator and his subject (not to mention the reader) are corrupt, the decay initiated by the fall may infiltrate the narrative representation; i.e. the speaker's very words. The reader, therefore, must ask whether or not the narrator, in representing Satan's mind, becomes just as satanic as his subject. Moreover, because the narrator must describe things and events largely non-human and metaphysical in language that can only signify what humans experience and know, his articulation is bound to be vexed. Consequently, the language that the narrator uses only *approximates* the things and events he means to convey. This language must be *accommodated* to the reader's and speakers' minds, which fact means that God, the Son, Raphael, Adam and Eve, Eden itself, and all unfallen creation, can only be glimpsed through the distorted lens of a fallen, sinful, corrupt, partial *medium*—human language. With a little help from his muse, the narrator struggles manfully to keep true to the divine nature of his subject, but does he always succeed? The epic question for the Milton student is: how can one faithfully depict an unfallen world, the divine nature, and even the supernatural with words signifying only sinful human ideas and experiences? Note that language, along with human knowledge, lost its accuracy at the fall and its unity at the Tower of Babel. (*Genesis* 11.1-9) When Adam fell, he lost his God-given capacity for apt naming, an ability that he had employed in naming the animals and every living thing. (See *Genesis* 2.19-20)

**6. Because both narrator and reader are post-lapsarian (they come "after the fall"), they bring fallen sympathies to *Paradise Lost*, sympathies that entail a preference for things satanic and an antipathy to all things holy.** Both, however, are well aware of this

proclivity and must make certain conscious choices in the course of the narrative drama. Most especially, they must choose whether or not to believe the accounts given by various characters. To do this wisely, the narrator relies upon his muse; if the reader wishes to be equally wise, he or she must compare accounts and choose to believe that to which more than one witness testifies forcibly. In other words, the reader must apply legal or scientific criteria to the case at hand—"probability" should be the reader's guide. Notice that *Paradise Lost*, like *Lycidas* and *Comus*, is a drama with many speakers; the reader must weigh and measure the contents of each one of these poems. The reader must also follow his or conscience and the rule of faith. In sum, just as Adam and Eve are enjoined to trust in and observe the word of God, Milton's "fit audience" must be guided by the basic Christian tenets set forth in the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, etc.

**7. Finally, the entire design of *Paradise Lost* reproduces in poetic and fictional form the complexities of reading scripture itself, the first inspired discourse.** (We should understand that this design, in the sense both of "theoretical aim" and of "structure," includes the reader's experience—or credulity, for that term may well apply—in interpreting textual presentations.) Here are some similarities between scripture and Milton's narrative in *Paradise Lost*:

- both the scriptures and the narrator's account *accommodate* things divine to human language and experience.
- both are themselves perplexed by ambiguities.
- both texts' complexities test the reader's faith; they test the reader's capacity to make the right interpretive choices.
- both texts' language works at once *explicitly* and *affectively*: it not only tells a story but, in the process of telling that story, works upon the reader's emotions or, to Milton's way of thinking, upon his very soul.
- both the authors of scripture and Milton prophesy; that is, they both interpret scripture, which action Protestant theology calls "prophesying."

## **Additional Comments:**

**The reader, always in a sort of discursive Chinese box, exists at five or more removes from the poet's actual vision of the event.** He must first relate the sequence of actions to the speaker's commentary and manner of expression. Then, he must compare the speaker's idiom to the commentary and expression proper to each character, and so forth, *ad infinitum*. By analyzing and grouping the discrepancies and coincidences between narrative structure and narrative commentary, between narrative expression and each character's idiom, between the idiom of one character and that of another, the reader can attempt to approximate the poet's view of the events represented. (We might avoid the worst limitations of that term, "view" by taking it in a spatial sense, as if we were to imagine the poet up on Mount Oreb or Sinai surveying the complexities of his own textual production down below.) These discrepancies and coincidences can take the form of similar or dissimilar actions, idioms, syntax, or diction. The reader cannot assume, at any one time, that one description or view of an event has the endorsement of the poet; rather, he must penetrate every layer of description or interpretation before he can come face-to-face with the "event" itself. The narrator's statements must be interpreted in light of the narrational structure; that is, in light of the actions, commentary, or descriptions that precede those statements. In interpreting the narrator's remarks, the reader must also take into account each character's idiom, syntax, and imagery—he must determine the extent to which the narrator and other characters share, or do *not* share, ideas and modes of expression. Finally, the reader must interpret each character's commentary and description in the light of the narrative structure as well as of the structure figured by all the poem's *dramatis personae*.

**Irony is a strong and persistent force in *Paradise Lost*.** Irony entails a discrepancy or incongruity between language and the actual nature of things, whether that reality consists in the speaker's true as against his apparent meaning (*verbal irony*); in the lacuna created by the reader's or speaker's superior knowledge as against that of a given character (*structural irony*); in the active frustration of a character's efforts or desires by a more powerful or supernatural force (*cosmic irony*); in the discrepancy between the actions or views of two characters or two situations—or between a character's vision of his acts and their ultimate result (*dramatic irony*); and in the discrepancy between a literary artifact's pretensions to beauty or truth—or even to imaginative authenticity—and that artifact's frail, paradoxical nature in that it is a purely verbal construction manufactured by a fallen human author. At one time or another, Milton employs versions of all these modes of ironic statement.